

symbiotic

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by [YourMinecraftBoyfriend](#)

Summary

As soon as Will's foot crossed the threshold to his home, his leg ceased to belong to him. Suddenly and completely, Hannibal took control of his muscles — strengthening and elongating them, altering the physical shape of Will's body seamlessly and without pain. The bite of chilling spring air ceased to sting his face as his vision sharpened and his mouth widened.

He'd forgotten how powerful they felt. Even with Hannibal controlling the quick snap of their legs, Will felt as if he was given a deep shot of adrenaline. He wasn't consciously moving their body but he felt the impact with the ground, the burn of their muscles, the drop of saliva that rolled off their thick tongue.

He felt more than human, allowing the problems of humanity to stay far behind him.

Will is enjoying his new life with his symbiote, for once he feels like he's not drowning in the loud thoughts of other people and he finally has a companion to alleviate his lonely existence. There's something wrong though, no matter how many deer they eat, they never seem to become full, and the hunger that's plagued Will since they merged is worsening.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Despite Jack's warnings, Will was utterly desensitized to the corpse in front of him. Between his work and keeping his parasite — *symbiotic organism!* — fed, the mauled corpses of a couple weren't the most haunting images he'd seen.

He sank into the killer regardless, feeling as Hannibal retreated from his prefrontal cortex to let Will perform his tricks uninhibited.

The evidence tags and cop cars disappeared. The midday sun retreated back down the horizon until the bright moon took its place. He watched the lovely couple as they pressed together by the warm fire, so naive, so unaware of what lurked just beyond the treeline.

He was a beast — wild, feral, and *starving*. Not for meat, as Will often found himself craving now, but for the hunt itself.

In his empathetic vision, he donned Hannibal's hulking form. His powerful limbs and strong jaws easily ran down and shredded the young lovers simply because he could, because he was *stronger*.

A low rumble started from behind his ears as he tore into their supple flesh. His sharp teeth were designed to tear off chunks, and he took deep pleasure in the evisceration.

Their pleas and cries didn't sound like human words to him. In this state, he could not distinguish the '*please no!*' and '*oh god!*' from the sounds of dying, bleating animals.

The rumbling played louder and a warm soothing sensation fell along his shoulders. He didn't want to be soothed, he wanted to maul, to smear his wild face in their blood and crunch bone between his elongated canines.

For once, he felt like he was what he truly was supposed to be, a beast, wild and untamed. Finally free from the prison his human self had been trapped in.

Only when the rumbling was too loud to ignore and the warmth spread down to his shoulders to cover his heaving chest, did he surface. The rise was gradual as the dull noise softened and the warmth trickled down to his fingers, as if his hand was being held as he was guided out of a dark tunnel.

The blood was wiped from his face and the bone shards vanished from his throat.

Have you returned to me?

"Mhmm." Will's thumb caressed the supple texture of one of Hannibal's spread tendrils as it formed in his palm. The sensation grounded him and sent a pleased hum through his symbiote.

Your fellow agents are expecting you, my dear.

"Don't call me that. It's unnerving, especially when you eat so many."

“What was that, Will?” Jack hovered right at his shoulder. He did his best not to flinch.

“This wasn't an animal, but the killer believes he is one, or is at least trying to convince himself.”

Jack raised a brow at him and his mouth sat in a hard, mistrusting line. “...right. There were also reports of violent attacks on livestock in the area.”

“They were his warm-ups. Practice kills. He's impulsive, but not sloppy. The truck driver was a test, this is his design.”

“Motive?”

“None, besides predatory instinct. These victims were just at the wrong place at the wrong time. Violence solely to fuel his addiction.”

“You believe it's a compulsion?”

“Most killers we have are victims of compulsion. It's what gets them caught.”

“Not all of them. We've still got some unsolves.” Will knew the white whale Jack was referring to. No new hollowed out dolls had appeared over the last few months though, and even if Jack had been officially taken off the doll-maker case, Will knew the man couldn't give up a chase so easily.

“Compulsion will catch this one, he's got a very specific pathology.”

“What should we be looking for?”

“I'd say start with figuring out how he managed to inflict those injuries. Knives are too ‘human,’ he'd want to use claws and teeth.”

Jack left him in the snow to round up his forensic team. They might find something hidden in the deep lacerations.

Wills retreated to the edge of the scene where hopefully no one would hear him murmuring to himself.

“What do you think?”

No human I've encountered had talons. I've lived in wolves, mountain lions, and once a bear — no living creature could have created those wounds. The bite markings are all wrong.

“You probably know quite a bit about bites.”

The best teacher is first hand experience.

“Oh, I'm very aware.” His empathy had given him enough first-hand experiences to last a lifetime, though lately the burden had been far lessened with Hannibal's assistance. Will's

brain allowed him a rare peace for the first time in his life, and all it took was an alien routinely suppressing certain bits so he could function in common society.

“I should teach you how to drive one of these days. I could get another hour or two of sleep on my morning commute.”

“What leaves you to believe I do not know how to operate a vehicle?” Hannibal preferred to speak to him in his 'floating head' form, Will suspected it was because he enjoyed watching Will's features, but it was possible he just liked to take in the world with his own eyes.

“Do you know how to drive? I only suspected since you said you haven't been here that long. And you crashed a car.”

“Five years I've been on your planet, and yes I've learned how motor vehicles worked in that time. Though, I didn't have a host willing to teach me, so it was more first hand experience.”

“So...can you or can't you?”

“I can, though I haven't quite gotten the grasp of parallel parking.”

Will couldn't help but laugh. The image of his alien parasite fumbling behind the wheel like a teenager was too ridiculous.

“I'll show ya sometime, there's a trick to it. You think you can get us the rest of the way home?”

“Of course, Will.” He seemed slightly offended that Will would imply he was less than perfect at something, arrogant bastard that he was.

Will allowed his control over his own body to drop as Hannibal quickly entangled himself into the muscles of his arms and legs. The floating head that started out sprouting from his shoulder, emerged from his neck as Will leaned back into the headrest.

A pair of swirling, white eyes emerged from the head, staring directly at Will.

“Shouldn't you be watching the road?”

“Two sets of eyes, my dear. It's not polite to avoid eye contact.”

“I told you, don't call me that. It's not polite to make pointed judgements either — I know you know about my problems with eyes.”

Hannibal's shark smile curved at the edges. On anyone else it would be a teasing smirk, but Hannibal's halloween mask of a face turned it horrifying. *“You never seem to have a problem meeting mine.”*

“You're different, you don't have veins, corneas, or irises. I can't read the microexpressions on someone that's not human. Also you usually just tell me what you're thinking, it's getting

you to shut up that's the problem.”

“You protest, but I know you enjoy my company more than you'll admit. You like having a voice around after so many years spent in silence.”

“I'd really appreciate it if you'd stop digging through my memories like that. Let me pretend I have at least a little privacy.” To be frank, he really didn't mind. He did at the beginning — those first few weeks he tried everything to shut Hannibal out from his painful memories — but now he saw how Hannibal cherished them, like a poet admiring the change of seasons.

“I can give you privacy, but we both know you'll want me back before too long, so I'll save you the heartache.”

Will just rolled his eyes and leaned back into the headrest, closing his eyes in a protest that Hannibal could probably see right through.

Hannibal was right. As much as he was a pretentious asshole at times, Will adored his company. Despite his initial apprehension, the last couple months had been the happiest he'd had in years. He no longer suffered from agonized solitude or the noisy press of other people's brains that Hannibal beat back with his claws and fangs.

Aside from the physical aspects of their bond, Will simply enjoyed his presence. Hannibal was smart as a whip and funny in his own dark way. Will would've liked him even if he wasn't ingrained in his skull.

Not that he'd tell Hannibal any of this. It would go right to his amorphous head.

Surprisingly, Hannibal got them home in one piece and relinquished his control back to Will once the dogs met them at the door.

Hannibal wasn't fond of them, or at least he pretended not to be. It seemed that one moment inside Buster's little head was enough for him to write off the pack entirely.

It was only minutes that Hannibal allowed him to coo and fret over the dogs before he was tugging their body towards the kitchen, using his long, fluid tendrils to gather pans, utensils, various spices, and frozen meats.

Will sat at the counter and pretended to write his report. Hannibal worked with the efficiency of a line cook and the grace of a chef, dancing through the process of preparation with loving ease.

Apparently, before he took residence in Will, he'd never cooked before. Raw, fresh organs were his meal of choice — there was no point wasting time with seasoning and marinating — but he found a recent passion for it. The meals he made were the equivalent of junk food for his alien body — delicious, but ultimately with little nutritional value.

He enjoyed the process though, and Will got a five star meal out of it so he wouldn't complain.

Will gave up all pretense of writing and just watched him openly. Thin tendrils seeped from under the hem of his shirt — only the thinnest shred of connection between them to allow the majority of Hannibal's body to sprawl through Will's kitchen like spider legs.

The sight would likely be frightening to anyone else, though this was Hannibal at his most docile. Will found him enchanting.

A burst of flame erupted from the pan Hannibal had hovering over the stovetop. It took Will a long moment to realize that his house wasn't about to burn down, Hannibal was just making a flambé.

“Where'd you learn how to do that? Certainly not from my memories.”

“Not from my previous hosts’ either. I didn't care to dig much into their pasts.” Just like while he was driving, a second pair of eyes formed on the back of his head to watch Will.

“Aww, now don't I feel special.”

“You should. Yours is the first body I've lived in that I had no desire to consume.”

“You're a real charmer, you know that?” Will palmed his cheek in his hands as he languidly watched from his position at the counter. Hannibal was flipping the singed meat expertly with one set of tendrils and grating ginger with another.

“Sarcasm falls easier from your lips than genuine sentiment. You're lucky I can feel your sincerity. To answer your question, I've been practicing while you sleep. There's quite a number of helpful online courses.”

“I guess I never realized that you don't sleep.”

“The late nights are rather dull, excepting the times my host becomes particularly restless.”

Will turned back to his report, hopefully Hannibal couldn't detect his embarrassment. “Well, they were worse before you fixed my head. So thanks for that.”

“It was my pleasure, and more for my sake than yours at the time.” With a flourish that was quickly becoming signature, Hannibal presented a perfectly charred, thick cut of meat, complemented by mushrooms and little herb garnishes. *“Braised venison with fresh shiitake and rosemary.”*

He made tiny adjustments to the artful plating, shifting the rosemary to the right, then back to its original position. There were two portions, as if this would be Hannibal's only dinner tonight.

Will didn't hesitate before digging in and was ultimately unsuccessful at repressing the low, appreciative noises in the back of his throat.

“You've been cooking for what, a month? A month and a half? There are people who would kill to be able to make something that tastes this good.”

“I don’t envy them. Humans are so limited by their bodies. I can’t imagine losing a third of the day to unconsciousness and only having access to four appendages.”

“Says the parasite-” “**Symbiote**” “- that can’t live without taking over a ‘limited’ body.”

“I never encountered an issue until the unfortunate circumstance that led to our meeting. I’m not beyond mishaps.”

Will hummed and went back to shoveling meat and mushrooms into his face.

The sun was still well above the horizon, but Will could already feel his eyes beginning to droop. An unsurprising occurrence, in fact it was routine. In early evenings, after Will took care of the animals and Hannibal fed him his normal supper, he would go hunting for his own meal. Usually he’d find deer in the surrounding forest, but he claimed that he ate whatever he found — coyotes, foxes, even the odd black bear were fair game.

Not that Will could verify what he said, he was always fast asleep during these hunts, by his own choice. He hadn’t consciously run around with Hannibal in their full form since their time at the frozen pond.

There was a quiet grace to that body, Will had wanted to pretend that it wasn’t designed specifically to be a predator.

Not tonight though. He’d grown curious over the past few weeks — there shouldn’t be any secrets kept by the organism that lived in his head.

“Hannibal, you can stop that.” The mounting fatigue halted, and slowly retreated. Wakefulness lightened his lids as his mind was returned to focus.

“I need to eat, Will.”

“I know. I want to come.” He knew that Hannibal felt his emotions, but the opposite was likely true as well, considering the hopeful excitement definitely didn’t blossom from him.

“Are you certain? The scene shall not be pleasant.”

“I am, I’ve seen worse at work anyway.” Will waited for trepidation to take hold, but it failed to manifest completely. This was an important aspect for his new way of life, something that Hannibal wanted, but couldn’t ask him to share if he believed that Will merely tolerated his life-giving practice. “C’mon let’s go. You haven’t run with me in two months.”

“You merely had to ask.”

As soon as Will’s foot crossed the threshold to his home, his leg ceased to belong to him. Suddenly and completely, Hannibal took control of his muscles — strengthening and elongating them, altering the physical shape of Will’s body seamlessly and without pain. The bite of chilling spring air ceased to sting his face as his vision sharpened and his mouth widened.

He'd forgotten how powerful they felt. Even with Hannibal controlling the quick snap of their legs, Will felt as if he was given a deep shot of adrenaline. He wasn't consciously moving their body but he felt the impact with the ground, the burn of their muscles, the drop of saliva that rolled off their thick tongue.

He felt more than human, allowing the problems of humanity to stay far behind him.

The air shifted on his lolled tongue, there was a certain taste in the air that wasn't just the brush of pines, dirt, and snow. The muscle was far more sensitive than what he was used to, and he couldn't stop himself from salivating — he'd scented their prey.

Hannibal dropped from their trotting runner's gait down to their hands and knees. Their thighs bunched, coiled to spring at a moment's notice. Pants turned to quiet pulls of breath as Hannibal stilled all their movement, flicking their tongue slightly with the breeze.

Quick as a flash, they sprang into action. Off in pursuit on their hands and clawed feet, they sprinted after the scent of flesh.

Will wasn't sure what they were pursuing yet, he didn't have the experience in this form to discern an elk from a squirrel.

They were upon the herd of whitetail deer before Will could register the clearing. Their animal instincts already had the creatures fleeing from them, but they were far too slow to outpace the monster that burst from the trees.

Without a moment of hesitation, they descended upon the largest in the herd — a proud buck that stood almost a head taller than the doe and young fawns. It gave a desperate shriek as their long needle-teeth sank into its neck.

Will felt the scalding blood wash down their throat and settle into their stomach. The animal suffocated as its own viscera flooded its exposed windpipe, choking it upon the thawing ground.

Their chest heaved, their claws raked through the flesh of the buck to release the delicious organs trapped inside.

He couldn't speak, his vocal cords did not belong to him now, but Hannibal must've still felt his hesitation. He paused before he could bring the first morsel to their lips.

Will, you do not have to force yourself to taste this meal. You've come far enough to satisfy me.

Words were difficult to form in their altered mouth, but Will managed to disfigure the vibrations of his vocal cords into something resembling speech.

"No, I want to taste." The blood he just imbued still was sliding thickly down his throat towards his stomach. His ache of hunger could be satiated by the offering hidden beneath the deer's ribcage. "Let go of our arms."

You will feel the raw organs as they are forced down your esophagus. Are you sure you can handle the knowledge? I'd hate for you to resent me after we finally struck an accord.

"I won't resent you, I asked for this. Now let me eat the liver, I'm starving."

Hannibal's control retreated from their clawed talons and Will peeled back the layer of skin and fat. The placement of the bowels seemed strange, until Will realized he was more used to seeing the torn guts of humans than animals.

Their sharp claws freed the dark liver of the buck with a few neat slices. The organ was warm and weighty in his palm, so recently full of life. Their jaw parted wide enough to engulf it entirely.

If the blood he tasted before was delicious, this was comparable to the first hit from a long-suffering addict, a craving satisfied. They didn't have molars in this form, but their body was amorphous. He could open their throat and swallow the liver whole.

The organ settled in their stomach, slightly easing the dull ache of hunger, but it wasn't enough, he wanted *more*. Will abandoned his thin pretense of civility and pried open the torso with their bulging forearms. He buried their teeth in the revealed meat — kidneys, lungs, intestines. Everything went down their eager gullet.

Eventually the torso was left without any more offerings, but still he wasn't sated. They were craving *something*, but their hungry tongue didn't flick against anything that could satiate them.

The brain, darling.

When Will was a boy, his father taught him how to break an apple into halves. The process was simple — all one had to do was apply the right amount of pressure to the right spot and the fruit split like it had been cut with a knife. All he had to do was dig his thumbs into the divot with the stem and push hard until it yielded.

Who knew a skull split just the same.

Will barely heard the splintering crack, he was more concerned with shoving their tongue into the jagged opening.

Their stomach howled at the first lick, demanding Will to engulf the wrinkled organ as soon as possible. In a fit of annoyance, he snapped off the buck's antlers in order to more easily dig into the brain's hollow.

When it was finally exposed, he consumed it in one bite, lamenting its small size.

Finally sated, he relaxed back on their haunches. A part of him was still a bit hungry, but he figured that was probably a constant now with the way their body operated. Their breaths came out in hot pants as adrenaline faded. The animal frenzy that overtook him retreated until Will could remember that he wasn't a being solely composed of hungry instinct.

He went limp and Hannibal took over their body once again.

“That was a lovely display, Will. I hadn’t realized there was such savagery in you.”

Immediately, their back straightened from its feral hunch. Hannibal plucked out the buck’s eyes with their elongated claws and popped them in their mouth like grapes.

“I hedge to say you were more animalistic than I am.”

Will couldn’t respond — their vocal cords weren’t under his control at the moment. He felt Hannibal’s pride though, he was clearly pleased how far Will sank into his depravity.

The proud thrum didn’t leave the entire trek home, but Will wasn’t sure how he actually felt. He could still sense the organs in his stomach, even when Hannibal returned him to his original form. Before tonight, Will never considered the sensation much, as it was indistinguishable from being full after a hearty meal, but now he knew exactly what sat inside him, and, more disturbingly, how it got there.

At the same time, he couldn’t deny the elation that coursed through him during the whole experience. The freedom he felt, not just the liberty he found in a powerful, unrestrained body, but the break from personhood their form allowed, was a heady sensation he would not forget any time soon.

Will didn’t join Hannibal the next evening, or the next seven evenings, not consciously anyway — he’d never deprive Hannibal his meals.

He wasn’t so conflicted about the act itself, he was worried about how much he enjoyed it. At all times, his body was shared, but that form turned them into a singular being. He hadn’t believed they could be merged deeper, but even now, while still feeling Hannibal nestled in his ribcage, he felt an unwanted sting of separation.

Will settled himself down to sleep and resolved to join Hannibal’s hunt tomorrow.

His head was too full — school children, clerks, coworkers, murderers, and every other person he encountered pressed on his lone mind, drowning him in their violent cacophony. With every new voice that joined the rising tide, his own shrank smaller and smaller, soon to wither away to nothing.

He attempted to call for help, knowing intrinsically that one specific voice could deaden the screeching masses, but no. He was alone, as alone as he’d always been despite the thousands of people that trampled over his vulnerable brain.

Water churned around him, throwing him in every direction. The sea foam was a soft pink as the waters darkened to a rusty red. The waves crashing around him sounded like it was hiding thousands of voices, just ready to flow into his lungs and parade him around like a puppet.

The thick sea of bodies battered him, and he felt far too small to stand up to the relentless onslaught. He didn’t know how he believed he could pick one voice from the roiling sea,

there were so many he could barely distinguish any of them.

Without warning or reason, suddenly the voices softened as he sank further into the depths. He held his breath in fear of choking, but without his choice, his lungs inflated, pulling not water, but precious air inside him.

The water held him safely, warmly like a lover. The voices above faded to blessed silence, leaving only him cocooned in the shifting press of comforting water. Still alone though, completely, unbearably alone.

Will. Come back to me.

The voice he hadn't remembered spoke. Will realized that it had brought Will down here, where it knew he would be safe. Will nuzzled deeper into its secure cradle.

You must rise, my Will. I can't help you when you've sunk so deep.

He didn't want to rise back to the surface, that's where all the painful voices were. He couldn't lose the only voice he wanted to hear again.

Rise, darling. You will be safe, I swear.

The voice wouldn't lie to him though, he had to trust it. Slowly, he unfurled his limbs from the fetal position he sank in. His eyes began to adjust from the deep water's inky blackness to the faint surface glow. Swimming became more of a burden as the water thickened underneath him, forming soft and solid.

Will emerged from his nightmare gently, wrapped in a thick, blood red sheet. Hannibal was cooing softly from within his skull, shushing him in between reassurances. He still spoke in that gravel, bone-chilling tone, but to Will, his voice was soothing.

"Mmm," Will grunted softly to show he was awake. The room around him was dark, not a hint of dawn spilled from his windows. Morning must still be quite a ways off.

Nightmares were not a new phenomenon in Will's life, but having someone comfort him after was. No medication or therapy could stop or soothe them, but Hannibal had learned to recognize the signs and would gradually lead him away from their clutches. Often now, when he woke from them, they felt more like simple dreams than unconscious torment.

Will wondered how he managed to live over three decades without another occupant in his head — without Hannibal to manage his broken psyche.

"Mrhm, 'annibal. Solid," Will barely slurred out his request, his voice not recovered from sleep and his brain yet to fully come online. Hannibal seemed to understand him anyway.

Hannibal's blanketing mass replaced the warmth he provided with Will's kicked down comforter and conglomerated into his balloon-shaped form, hovering just over Will's chest.

Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal's floating head and turned on his side, squeezing Hannibal to his bare chest in the process. He held his symbiote tightly, chanting *'don't leave*

me’ over and over within his head.

Hannibal burrowed into his arms and snuck one tentacle down to encircle Will’s ankle. Will heard the loud and clear *‘never,’* even without Hannibal’s booming voice.

He pressed his lips to the crown of Hannibal’s more solid head before he tucked his alien parasite under his chin, holding him directly over Will’s steadily thumping heart.

Sleep once again overtook him. This time it was quiet and painless.

Will sat at his counter the next morning, watching Hannibal crack four eggs into a pan at the same time. He was humming — some aria he’d forced them to listen to on the drive home a few days ago (Will could hear it in the back of his head as Hannibal hummed, apparently they shared earworms).

Something in the air had shifted last night. Will wasn’t sure how to place his finger on it, but the bright, cheery affection he felt couldn’t be his own.

Could it?

Will was generally a pretty dour individual, but he found his foot tapping against the railing of the high counter seat, not out of anxiety, but a reserved desire to dance around the small space of his kitchen.

“Hannibal, about this morning...”

“There’s nothing you should be worried about. You should not be forced to suffer through your nightmares alone.”

“No, I mean, thanks.” Will recalled the way it felt to not only be held by him, but to hold him in turn. He’d never measured the way they touched to human interactions, he couldn’t since, technically, they were always touching, but there was a certain intimacy they shared in the quiet dark that they hadn’t explored before.

What had Will compared it to in his dream? Prior to regaining consciousness, he equated the warmth to the touch of a lover. “It was nice.” More than nice. Even in the light of day, without pretense of comfort, Will craved the contact.

Hannibal must’ve heard the slight hitch in his tone, or could sense the direction of his thoughts, because he quickly removed the pan from heat and retracted back to Will’s side.

“We need not only be close when you are in distress.” Hannibal’s tendrils thickened around Will’s shoulders and sank below his shirt. They snaked down to his chest and squeezed his ribs lightly, just enough to feel the pressure. *“Humans require a fair amount of physical contact to meet their needs. I’m happy to provide.”* Some of the tendrils sank into his skin, some thickened at the surface and held him tighter. The ones that sank in wrapped around his ribs and rested right against his heart. *“To make up for all those years you went without.”*

Hannibal could definitely feel him shudder. Will's breath hitched at the rare, decadent pleasure of simply being held, without reason at that. He had known for years that he was lonely, but he hadn't known he wanted this, he hadn't known he craved it.

Will brought his own arms to his chest, imitating last night's contact. Hannibal rumbled lowly in response — a simple, contented sound that Will felt he would've reciprocated if he was able.

"You only had to ask for it, my Will. I never would have denied you."

He just nodded and released Hannibal after a few minutes, allowing him to go back to preparing breakfast.

Hannibal seemed to take their morning as blanket permission to touch him whenever, and however, he pleased. The contact was never uncomfortable or unwelcome, so Will didn't object, but it did lead to a few awkward moments in the coming few days.

Hannibal would wrap around his midriff while he was teaching, causing him to stumble over his words briefly. He'd stroke a tendril slowly against the palm of his hand while Will was studying bodies on the autopsy table, forcing a very inappropriate blush. He'd massage the meat of Will's thighs after he'd been standing too long, which sparked far more indecent thoughts than he should be having while examining crime scene photos.

Of course they still sniped and bickered and poured over unsolves together, more-than-friendly contact hadn't changed that, but it did give a whole new avenue to push the few boundaries that were left between them.

Jack paced his office, every now and again picking up one of the photos splayed on his desk, and then throwing it back down like it personally was responsible for the bodies it bore.

"Pathologies like this don't slip through the system. Someone must've noticed." Jack was ranting just as much to the photographs as he was to Will.

"He's careful, Jack. He's probably been concealing his nature for years. He knows how to hide it." Currently, Hannibal was slowly slithering up from his ankles inside his clothing. The unhurried touches tingled his nerves as he crawled his way up Will's legs.

"Can't hide everything. What were the lab results?"

"They said the bite marks were too deep to match anything that's around now. Too wide for wolves, too large for grizzlies. They're bringing in a specialist today to see if there's any matches they might have overlooked." Will's knees almost buckled when he felt Hannibal crawl to the top of his calf, caressing the sensitive skin at the joint. He clamped his mouth shut to keep from making any sounds that would draw Jack's attention.

Still, he didn't stomp his leg or slap the back of his knee. The touch still was comforting and sweet, though distracting.

"When are they supposed to be here?"

"About twenty minutes. He's on loan from the field museum, Price thought our animal might be prehistoric."

Jack grunted in response, his impatience filled the room like a heavy fog.

By the time the specialist arrived, Hannibal had crawled up to Will's thighs. He'd quickly abandoned the pretense of a massage and was simply kneading the flesh like a cat — Will almost expected the presence of tiny bites of claws.

The man they brought in had tired, blank eyes and watched them work with pronounced disinterest. He introduced himself as Randall Tier, though he didn't offer much more than his name and credentials. The first spark of attention Will detected in him was when they brought him to the lab, his face lit up like a child on Christmas when he saw the deep bites.

"What are we looking at here, Mr. Tier?" Jack asked after barely giving enough time for him to examine the body.

Tier inspected the punctures for a few seconds before he answered, interrupting Jack before he could ask again.

"A bear. The spread is close to what we see in polar bears, but their jaws aren't big enough to account for that spacing. The only bear that's large enough would be a cave bear, but the last one died out 24,000 years ago."

Tier was careful in his speech, intentional. Not enough to be suspicious, but enough to ring Will's alarm bells.

"We're not looking at an animal attack. There was no rutting, no missing flesh. All we have are bodies killed by unfamiliar tools. Any theories?" Part of what made Jack a brilliant agent was his careful manipulation of information. He was gifted in the reveal — holding onto and dispensing information in an attempt to catch suspects in a lie. The practice leaked into every interaction and was frustrating when it was turned on Will, but at the moment, he was grateful to watch Jack's inherent mistrust.

Tier considered Jack's question and the bodies again, still relatively unfazed. "I'm not a detective, Agent Crawford, but the bite pattern is unmistakable. A predator did this." The fish eyed look he'd adopted vanished for a scant second and Will felt a flash of satisfaction lance through his brain, decidedly not his own. Hannibal kept a loose grip on his mirror neurons while Will was working, knowing only to deaden them when Will was off the clock.

Jack dismissed the specialist shortly after, gruffly, but with demands to contact them if he had any more theories.

Hannibal kept kneading the flesh of Will's thighs, but he felt as part of him snaked up towards his head, perching inside his skull.

I could find out for you, if you ask me to.

Will mumbled out a distracted 'bathroom' before he left the team in the lab, now huddled around a photo Price pulled up of a prehistoric bear.

"What do you mean?" He didn't take them to a stall, just around the corner to an empty hallway where he could easily spot people before they noticed him talking to himself.

If you touch him, I could read his thoughts, as I do yours. You found that man suspicious, I can confirm your suspicions.

They didn't have any other leads at the moment and the investigation would certainly be sped up with Hannibal's assistance. If Tier was the killer they were looking for, he would strike again soon. The kind of animal he saw himself as hungered often, he wouldn't be able to resist, especially after seeing the results of his work today.

"Alright. We'll go in a few days, don't want him getting spooked."

Hannibal made that contented little hum, almost a purr, and moved his gentle exploration to Will's midsection, stroking over the knobs of his spine and the jut of his ribs. Will sighed and covered Hannibal's slowly writhing form with one hand before he pushed away from the wall and headed back to the lab.

Will always enjoyed their hunts, now that he allowed himself to come along. The thrill didn't diminish, there were new highs to chase every time they ran through the woods. Hannibal didn't usually let Will do the running as he wasn't quite used to avoiding trees at the high velocity they traveled at, but the few times he was in control, he couldn't avoid the occasional whoop and holler that made him feel decades younger than he was.

The hunger was easier to manage when he anticipated it. He didn't feel that utter desperation that he did that first hunt, but when he encountered the scent of fresh organs, the smell stirred him, just as it had before.

There was a certain freedom in giving in to the animal desires their body wanted him to. He'd crouch down on their hands and knees and dig into the opened flesh face-first — humans ate with their hands, but when they hunted out here, he didn't want to feel human.

He always saved the brain for last. Nothing else could satiate the final craving before they returned to their home, but each time, Will couldn't help but feel the taste of the organ wasn't as satisfying. Each brain gave diminishing returns, just a tad more disappointing than the last.

Yesterday, he was still hungry by the time they got home. It soured the whole experience, turning their powerful legs heavier, and their strides not as quick. Will fished out his chocolate ice cream when they returned, taking turns swallowing spoonfuls as they read by the light of his fireplace.

Hannibal made that contented hum again and settled into the divot of Will's collarbone. Will wished he wasn't still feeling that small ache in his stomach so he could fully unwind.

He found Randall Tier in front of a display of bear skulls. They were lined up from the small skulls of sun and black bears to the larger grizzlies and polar bears. On the far side was a wide, menacing cave bear skull that made the rest look like its trailing pack of cubs.

Randall picked up one of the polar bear skulls and brought it close to the grizzlies. Will honestly couldn't tell the difference between them.

"Did you know that polar and brown bears are nearly the same species? Their skulls are almost identical, despite appearing very distinct. We used to think that polars were a subspecies that kept traveling north until they evolved to the harsher climates, but the population that was studied was flawed. Too much crossbreeding between the two species made the research essentially useless. Turns out the common ancestor diverged over 100,000 years ago, but the design remained almost entirely unchanged, causing them to still be able to crossbreed." Randall stroked one of the teeth with his thumb, pressing into the sharp canine.

"There was no need to change the design. Sharks and crocodiles have been reverting into the same forms since before the Triassic." Will never thought he'd get to use the facts he memorized from the dinosaur documentaries he'd occasionally get to watch as a kid, but as always, his job led him down many different avenues. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." He allowed a touch of his southern drawl to seep into his words.

"Successful predators follow a certain pattern. Humans...they're quite a ways away. There's no fossil records of creatures that shared our build. We must seem quite unnatural to the animal kingdom." He returned the skull to the display with a diminutive sigh, almost distraught if it wasn't so resigned.

"Humans are omnivores. Allows for a bit more flexibility. Animals get strange when they have access to wider arrays of food sources, they can develop features that aid in their lives not solely built for predation."

The corner of Tier's lip twitched, like a dog holding back a snarl. His content, soft grin while examining the skull fell back into disdain-tinged neutrality.

"How can I help you, Agent Graham? I do not have any more findings to report." He clearly wanted Will gone, but the museum was well within its public hours, so he couldn't very well tell Will to leave.

"I'd just like a record of the cave bear skulls kept here. Because of your help, we have reason to believe that our assailant may be using one as the murder weapon." Will had to give it to him, he was creative if nothing else. A skull was a far cry from a gun or a knife.

"Cave bears are very common. You can find their skulls in every state, almost every reputable natural history museum has displayed them at one point or another."

"Just covering all our bases."

He shrugged and walked off in the direction of one of the 'staff only' doors. There would be no record of missing bones, if he was meticulous enough to not leave DNA at his scenes, he wouldn't be so negligent to leave a trace that could be connected back to him here.

Not that it mattered, Will only had to touch him.

"How long will this take?" Will murmured into his jacket.

Give me five minutes alone with him, I just need some time to dig through his memories.

Five minutes. Will could handle five minutes alone in his head, as he had for the three decades prior.

"How are you going to stay safe?" He probably shouldn't be this worried about the well being of an alien parasite, who Will knew was more than capable of perfectly controlling a person, but Hannibal was dear to him. He was already dreading those five minutes.

Yours is the only body I practice symbiosis with. I'll control him as I've controlled every other creature.

"Alright. You sure you'll be done in five minutes? I don't want to leave you in there longer than we need to."

Yes, Will. Only five minutes and I'll return, I swear. If you don't in turn, I'll hunt you till the ends of the earth.

Will let out a startled chuckle that turned a couple patron heads in his direction. Hannibal had to know that Will stopped wanting him gone almost immediately. "You couldn't get rid of me if you tried."

Hannibal twisted around his chest, holding him tightly in thickened tendrils and Will rubbed his hand over the conglomerated mass above his heart — their version of a reassuring embrace.

Tier reappeared bearing a manila folder. "These are all of our acquisition and current holding records. I took the time to see if anything was missing, but everything's accounted for. You can check for yourself."

"I will, thank you." Will held out his hand with the friendliest smile he could plaster on and Hannibal slithered down to his palm, residing just beneath the skin.

Tier looked at the offering with mild apprehension before he took Will's hand. Immediately, Will felt as Hannibal's body was almost sucked out of him. He let go of Tier's frozen hand, and he got the sudden sensation as if he hacked off his own limb. He knew where Hannibal was, he could still see the traces of him running up Tier's veins, but that didn't settle his racing mind as he desperately, involuntarily, searched for the second being that was *supposed* to be inside him.

Hannibal must've been able to control Tier as easily as he claimed, because the man went stiff as a board and stared straight ahead.

Will turned his back and glanced down at his watch. He could bear five minutes alone, he'd just...look at some of the exhibits and come right back.

He accidentally met a young boy's eyes at the first exhibit he stopped at — a pterosaur display — and almost crumpled to the floor. All the thoughts Hannibal had been tirelessly keeping out rushed into him. A child's eyes cracked the sturdy, high dam that Hannibal constructed and the white spray of flooding ideas overpowered his porous mind.

After weeks and months of Hannibal's aid, he'd grown complacent. His own forts were not in place — his glasses were at home, his eyes were not averted, his demeanor wasn't geared to keeping people at bay. He was abruptly three and a half feet tall, glaring up at the plaid-shirted man who was blocking the flying dinosaur exhibit. He was waiting for his mother, who'd taken his little sister to the bathroom, and this man was blocking the display card.

Will wasn't sure how long it took for him to snap back to his own body and step aside. Certainly longer than it should have.

He stared down at his own feet, trying to reconcile that the ground was two feet further away than it had been a second ago. He had to fight off the urge to run towards the women's restroom to seek the comfort of the mother and baby sister he didn't have.

His nails bit into his palms and the pain was finally enough to bring him back to the present. Christ, how had he lived this long without Hannibal to un-fuck his head?

Will glanced down at his watch, seven minutes had passed. He sprinted back to the bear exhibit, uncaring of the attention of the patrons he was drawing.

Tier was standing still as a statue, exactly where he left him. Will grabbed the exposed skin of his wrist before any higher thought could give him pause. Immediately, his tight grip loosened as Hannibal seeped back inside him. His tense shoulders slumped down when he felt Hannibal stretch himself out, sending his tendrils to every vein, muscle, and organ.

Will walked out as quickly as he could before Tier could regain full consciousness. Hannibal quickly took his spot wrapped around Will's brain — he felt that movie reel effect that told him Hannibal was reading his memories — and tried to force himself to calm down into the sensation.

Oh, my Will. What happened?

Will threw on a pair of headphones that weren't plugged in, people would still give them strange looks, but at least he'd only cause mild annoyance rather than concern. "Got too used to having you here. Forgot how overwhelming it all is."

Hannibal settled around his shoulders and sent a small hit of dopamine through his system. *You won't have to get used to it. I apologize that our separation caused you undue suffering.*

He was genuinely upset, Will could tell, but there was a possessive spark that still laid inside his symbiote that was pleased. Will's inability to exist on his own meant that he'd fight to keep Hannibal around more than Hannibal's promises to not leave.

There was something deeper though, more than surface possession. It was more difficult for Will to read what Hannibal was thinking than for Hannibal to sense Will's thoughts, but he could, especially if Hannibal still had his tendrils wrapped around Will's brain like he did now.

Will opened his mind and empathy further to grasp the metaphorical tendrils of Hannibal's thoughts, and found worry in the buried shreds. Concern and loneliness that was more human than Will thought him capable.

In those few minutes Will hadn't returned, Hannibal had started to believe he'd abandoned him, cast him aside at the first opportunity, despite what he knew about Will's mental state.

"I'm sorry I worried you too. Let's not try that again any time soon."

Agreed. I was...unprepared for the effect our separation would have on myself. I'd never been so attached to my other hosts as to worry that they might not return.

"We're both kinda flying by the seat of our pants here. Home?" Hannibal sank into his chest and curled around his heart, soothing himself with the steady beats.

Yes, please.

"I forgot to ask, what did you find in his head?" The pasta Hannibal made had black noodles, which gave him a bit of apprehension at first, but was delicious as always. Apparently, you were supposed to use squid ink in the preparation. Will wasn't sure where he got squid ink, or even *how* he got squid ink.

"He's your killer, there's no doubt about it. Did not have to dig down much further than the surface to see where he replays his kills like songs."

"How's he doing it?"

"He's built a suit. He stole one of the skulls and recorded it lost in transit. There are pistons and mechanical firings attached that he controls by moving his limbs and jaw. The rest of the suit is leather and more metal fixtures. He wears it near constantly when he's not out in public. His mind craved more violence than any creature I'd been in. The bears that draw his attention are far more inclined to laze about when they get the chance."

Will twirled another bite of the noodles onto his fork and brought it to his stained lips. "So we find the suit and we have our evidence. We'll need a warrant first if this is gonna stay above board."

"Since when have you cared about staying within the law's confines? He craves the hunt, Will. He might attack again before you get the chance to arrest him."

"I'm an agent —" *"Unofficially."* " — not a vigilante. We'll check out his home tomorrow and if I send anything we find over to Jack, he can get a warrant in twenty minutes tops. Good enough?"

"I suppose that's acceptable." Hannibal finished his own portion of pasta in one large, though still clean, bite and pooled himself in Will's lap. Will trailed his free hand along the mass of him, dark red and faintly pulsing, as if there was a freed living organ purring on his thighs.

"I want to do the running tonight. Just tell me where to go."

"As you wish, Will. Just don't blame me when your trampling scares all the prey away."

Will flicked Hannibal's head with his pointer finger and Hannibal pinched his stomach in retaliation.

Tier lived in a small cabin-style home about an hour outside Baltimore. The house was isolated, with a decent spot of property and a moderately sized work shed sat away from the road.

All in all, it wasn't much different than Will's little home. Tier's property also pressed against a few acres of farmland though, so it was easy to assume where he'd began attacking livestock.

There were no lights on inside the house, but it was nearing midnight, so there was no surprise. However, Will couldn't see his car parked in the outdoor garage and no tire tracks in the snow led to the shed. The only tracks he saw were to and from the shed, and they looked hours old at this point.

"I recommend we do not start with the home. If we are lucky, everything you shall need for your investigation will be in his work shed."

Will kept his steps as light as he was able, but the snow still crunched under his feet. No sounds stirred from the house though, the windows stayed black.

There was a sturdy padlock on the shed door, but one of Hannibal's snaking tendrils quickly worked the latch — he used the tentacle like a lock pick.

Inside there was a large hanger embedded in the ceiling and a long work table that was covered in hand drawn blueprints. A few loose pistons and leather straps lay strewn about, but the monster suit that Hannibal mentioned was missing.

An image of it dangling from the central hook flashed before his eyes. *I saw the suit in his memories. He's likely out using it now.*

The blueprints contained earlier versions of the work. Along the wall there were a series of thick, curved blades that seemed like they would form the beast's claws.

He snapped a few pictures of everything he could find inside, sending them over to Jack with a 'tier's your guy' before he exited the shed.

As he expected, Jack responded within seconds. 'get off the scene. im required to reprimand my agents if they act outside protocol. do i make myself clear?'

'crystal'

'good. go home, and good work today'

It was fortunate that Jack cared more about results than following the law to the letter, also Will wasn't sure how he was going to explain how he made it all the way out here without a car.

Hannibal allowed him to run them home, which only served to remind Will how unsatisfying their last hunt was. Their corded limbs were sore and aching; their muscles hadn't knit fully back together after their last excursion. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary for the hunt, but as usual, the taste of the animal's brain was unsatisfying.

They hadn't even settled for deer. They'd tracked down a large, fat black bear that actually got a few good swipes in before Will was able to sink their teeth into its neck. The brain was larger, yes — as most carnivores' were — but it still didn't settle the craving, and now their body was suffering in response.

"Hannibal, I'm hungry. Let's find something before we get back."

As you wish, darling. Will could almost hear the sigh in his voice, resigned and hidden. There was something he wasn't saying, but Will was too hungry to care, so he veered off the path they were taking and wandered into the woods surrounding the back roads.

Hannibal had been teaching him how to track scents, how to take in the information from their sensitive tongue and turn it into actionable thought. At first, it was difficult to distinguish the musky scents of animals from each other, and how to determine how fresh the scents were, but practice bred confidence, and he'd been getting better at following a trail.

A small herd of whitetails was nearby. Freshly peeled bark on a young tree confirmed there was at least one buck among them, though if one of the does was larger, he'd go for that instead. Their tongue dangled from their mouth, flicking with the shift in the wind that revealed his target's presence. They were about sixty yards north, and the wind was in their favor, so if he quieted his steps the way Hannibal showed him, he'd be upon them before they had a chance to scatter.

Practiced pursuit gave him a greater understanding of deer's habits than years of living near them ever had. He'd learned to appreciate the way they'd bellow in alarm and wheeze out their dying gasps. The crunch of bone under his jaw became akin to ecstasy, satisfying like an extension of the feeling he got when he hooked a fish. He hadn't seen the appeal of hunting before, especially after the Hobbs case, but he felt he understood it now.

The buck fell limp beneath their teeth and once again, Will tore through his insides and devoured everything in sight. He cracked the skull open, slurped down the brain, and realized the craving hadn't receded even a smidge.

He let out a frustrated bellow and slammed their fist into a nearby tree, splintering the wood and toppling the oak in one blow. "What is *wrong* with us?!"

Will, we should head home. You're making too much noise.

"I'm starving, Hannibal! Aren't you?" he demanded.

I am, but it cannot be helped. Let's go.

Will wanted to rant more, punch more trees, give into some outlet to vent the anger hunger caused, but Hannibal took over their body before he got the chance.

I'm not asking, Will. It's time for us to go.

He couldn't move or protest, so he was left to stew in their frustration as Hannibal ran them back to Wolf Trap. The whipping wind and passing blur of trees didn't settle him like it normally did; he wanted to sock Hannibal in the jaw, but knew his amorphous body would just mold around his hand.

"Will, please."

"Fuck off. You know I hate it when you force me to shut down like that." He'd been snapping at his parasite since he regained control of his tongue.

"You were toppling trees. Someone would have eventually come to investigate."

"No one was around that far out. And I think I should be allowed to feel a little goddamn frustrated. Why are we still hungry?"

"We've been using our full form a lot, its energy consuming—"

"Bullshit. You used it every night before I started coming with you."

"Two conscious brains in that form are difficult to maintain. The human mind requires a fair amount of resources while it's awake." Hannibal was basically hissing his words as he spoke. His permanent snarl hitched even higher on his gruesome face.

"Oh, so now it's my fault? I thought you liked it when I came with you, when I embraced my 'animalistic tendencies.'"

"Will..."

He noticed the creeping wash of serotonin before it could take over his mind in a happy fog. "Cut that out. I'm serious, Hannibal. You can't just drug me whenever I'm upset with you!"

"Your levels were—"

"No they weren't! You're still avoiding the question!"

"I already told you—" Their argument was halted by the sudden sound of shattering glass. A piercing human roar thundered through the room and pounded against Will's eardrums. Before he could react, the bear suit was upon him, clamping its jaws around his vulnerable neck.

He heard the click engage of a piston before the jaws attempted to snap shut, severing his airway. They never connected; his own suit covered him an instant before the teeth could touch his skin.

Tier growled at him, low and menacing. "Give it to me. You don't deserve it!"

Will jumped back and landed on his haunches, their full bulging form pulling together again instantly. "You don't want to do this, Randall."

"It wants to be with me! You can't give it what it needs."

Will could feel their claws dig into the hardwood, he could so easily make the same marks on Tier's skin. How *dare* he believe he could come between them, that he'd allow him to steal Hannibal from his skin once again.

"It belongs to me! You have no idea the power you hold," Tier shouted.

"I'm well aware." Will allowed their long tongue to trail across their shark teeth. Tier's burning jealousy could start fires, he so desperately wanted the sharpened claws and hulking frame. His own monster suit looked weak in comparison, and Tier knew it.

He charged anyway, though he had to know there was no matching the true monster he saw before him.

One swipe of clawed forearm sent Tier crashing through the front door, rendering one of his mechanical arms unusable. Tier stumbled back to his feet as Will advanced, preparing to tear the suit from him when he reached for his pocket, pulling out a small device with a circular speaker head attached.

"If you won't give me what I deserve, I'll take it from you."

Will wanted to tear away not just his mechanical limbs now, but his arms and legs that contained flesh and bone. Hannibal was not a possession, but regardless he belonged to Will, and Will alone. Before he could give his punishment though, Tier pressed on the speaker and a shrill, lasting noise pierced his eardrums. The sound felt like it was splitting him, pulling him apart at the edges. All he could do was scream.

A mirrored scream came from outside his body, low and agonized until it was separate from him completely. The agony the sound caused stopped as abruptly as it started and Will's scream died in his throat — the second shriek did not.

By the time Will regained his footing, Tier was reaching out towards the jolting, blood red mass in the snow. Hannibal was writhing like he'd been electrocuted, there was no semblance to his form, just a contorting blob that Will could clearly see was in immense pain.

"Stop! Stop, you're hurting him!" Will was a second too late. Tier ceased the sound the moment his hand fell upon Hannibal's form. The cold, snow-covered ground must've been excruciating for Hannibal's vulnerable body.

Will watched in horror as Hannibal sank inside the other man, leaving Will barren and alone. Tier's suit bent and snapped off him in mindless chunks, discarded eagerly as their form grew. Their skin shuddered and rippled, not the smooth muscular shape that he took with Will.

The cave bear skull was the last to break. Its jaw splintered and landed at Will's feet as the head fell to the side as Hannibal's and Randall's grew to match the size of their towering body. For the first time since their initial acquaintance, Will was terrified, but more than that, he was enraged. He stood with his spine straight as Randall let out a roar that was far more accurately animalistic than his first attempt.

They charged, dropping down to their hands and haunches as they rushed towards Will at breakneck speed. He had no defenses; without a doubt, Tier would kill him with the only creature that Will could ever claim understood him.

The moment before they collided, Will saw the claws retract. The arms that were aimed to slam into him changed course at the last second, enfolding him in a tight embrace as they tumbled through the snow. He didn't catch Tier's horrified expression as Hannibal enveloped Will once again, regaining his rightful host.

Will shoved away the interloper with a kick powerful enough to send him flying backwards. He knew he felt a few ribs crack under their heel.

"Hannibal, are you alri-"

He still has the speaker!

Will didn't need to hear any more. Tier was bleeding from his head where it had smacked against a tree, but he was still conscious, and reaching for the handheld speaker. The scent of his blood threw his senses into even more frenzied disarray than they already were. A sudden desire to hunt, to *feast* welled up within him, as it did when he tasted the first drop of blood during their kills.

He lunged forward, opening their maw wide and parting their needle teeth. For the first time tonight, he saw genuine terror on Tier's face, but it was hidden in an instant as Will snapped their jaws around his head.

A single, powerful bite and the head of Randall Tier was severed from his body and was being crushed to paste beneath their serrated teeth. Will felt the instant the skull shattered; he swallowed down bits of bone as brain matter coated their tongue.

He groaned in quick ecstasy, halting all movement besides the bob of his throat.

This was the taste he'd been chasing. Craving settled in an instant as the nutrient-packed organ slid down their esophagus. He tore open their prey's soft stomach to expose the sweet viscera inside.

He didn't regain his sense of self until he'd swallowed down the lungs, liver, and both kidneys. Tier's pancreas was halfway to his lips when his eyes fell upon the dead man's limp hands. His opposable thumbs and furless forearms forced Will's backseat humanity to the surface.

He dropped the organ before it could touch his lips with a panicked stumble. As hunger receded, their hulking form shrank and Will was left looking at Tier's headless corpse with his own human eyes.

He fell to his hands and knees, coughing and gagging on the cold ground. His throat constricted, for a moment he was confident he was going to vomit, but his esophagus forcibly relaxed, keeping the human organs in his stomach.

Will was guiltily relieved. He didn't want that aggravating hunger to return.

His symbiote was quiet, Will realized he'd barely spoken the whole encounter. He hadn't even tried to take charge of their body, leaving the fight solely to Will's control.

"Hannibal...what did you *do* ?" Will's voice was thick with threat and exhaustion.

"He had to die, for both our sakes." His floating head didn't fully manifest, only his sharp teeth on the back of Will's hand.

"We *ate* him! You knew we were craving human meat! Why would you keep this from me?"

He fell silent and retreated back into Will's skin, settling around his stomach.

"Hannibal! Hannibal we're not done talking about this!" Will stuck his fingers in his own throat, triggering his gag reflex. Hannibal ripped his fingers from his mouth before the bile could rise.

Will, be reasonable, he chided, though still didn't come out from his skin.

"That's rich, coming from you."

Go inside. You'll get frostbite if you're out here too long.

"Why don't you just wrap me up? Or better yet, force me to bed. It's never stopped you before."

I don't enjoy forcing your compliance. We're supposed to be companions.

"Where was all that compassion five minutes ago when you let me *bite a man's head off*."

Hannibal fell silent again; Will would've punched him if he was able.

"Answer me!"

...go inside, Will. He didn't enjoy how small Hannibal's voice was. The thin, pleading words didn't suit the confident egomaniac that he shared his life with.

"No. Not until you tell me what you're trying to hide." His hands and feet were going numb from the cold, but stubbornness was the only tool he had left.

Fine, but go inside first. Will wanted to insist further, but the cold was biting, and he didn't want to continue staring at Tier's mangled corpse. He stomped inside and immediately flopped down in front of the still-lit fireplace. It was a miracle that nothing caught aflame during Tier's attack, though he'd have to deal with the broken window and shards of furniture sooner rather than later.

"Start talking."

Hannibal took his time forming his head. The tendrils around him shifted uneasily and he hovered almost a full two meters from where Will was sitting. They hadn't maintained this almost-polite distance in weeks.

"I'm...unsure where to begin."

"How about you start with the obvious. You eat human flesh."

"Yes."

"You need it, or the body starts to deteriorate. You've been quieter recently, you knew this would happen."

"I did. My body requires certain chemicals that are only found in the human brain. Animals are similar enough to survive off of temporarily, but..."

"But eventually they won't be enough." Will pressed his hands to his eyes, trying to wipe away the lethargy that settled when adrenaline receded.

"I can last a fair amount of time if there is enough built up in my system."

Will knew what he was trying his best not to say. He clearly wanted to avoid having to speak the words himself from the way he shrank back from Will's presence.

"...Randall wasn't the first person you ate." There was no revelation, Will was confident and not as horrified as he should have been. "You weren't 'incompatible' with your previous hosts, or at least not incompatible enough to kill them. You ate them, more than just an organ or two."

"Yes."

"When you first saw me, you planned to eat me as well." Will stroked one hand along the tendril that still connected them.

"Yes."

"When did you change your mind?"

"Almost instantly. Yours is the most beautiful mind I had ever seen, Will, and I've seen so many. I didn't want to consume it, I wanted to live inside it."

"You were starving. How long had it been since your last meal?" Will shifted closer on the sofa, trailing his fingers along the tendril as he approached.

"The last human I ate was the one I'd become stranded with. He died and I had my meal before the wildlife found me."

"Did you care? You lived in him, you had to feel something." He hoped, against his human morals, that the nameless, brainless, dead man didn't mean anything to Hannibal, that he was a tool used and discarded. Despite his outrage, the thoughts he had during his fight with Tier remained true — Hannibal was his and his alone. Will was the only one that was allowed to harbor him, feed him, experience the monstrosity he could create.

"Not at all. I've never cared for a single human until I met you. I did not even care for members of my own species during the short time I was in their presence."

Guilty, thrilled relief licked through him and possessive heat rose to his cheeks. He wanted to hold Hannibal, reassure him even though, logically, Will should still be infuriated and disgusted.

"You said something to Tier when you were inside him, to get him to come after us. He knew about our other form. Why would you be so reckless?"

"As you said, I was starving. I was not going to eat you Will, and I had no intention of wasting away. Randall was a killer, and a sloppy one. Eventually you would have caught him, with or without my help, I was simply giving his body, which would've been locked in an institution or given lethal injection, a better purpose. I did not intend to make you consume him, but upon witnessing your rage, I could only bask in it. I was hoping that once you killed him, I could convince you to let me partake his flesh — leave nothing to go to waste."

"You could have told me. I doubt there's much you could reveal that would make me reject you now. You saw how much of a mess I was when you left."

"I didn't enjoy seeing you in that state. You were afraid. Did you really believe I would abandon you so easily?"

"I didn't know what to believe, he almost killed you! Why would you give him that power? Why wouldn't you *tell me* we could be separated like that? It hurt, I could feel you dying. Why would you put us through that? Why would you put *yourself* through that?" Will pulled on the tendril, drawing Hannibal closer as he moved towards him along the sofa. The almost-liquid tendril curled around his hand, dipping in between his fingers and teasing along the blood vessels just below the skin's surface.

"I wasn't sure you would kill him otherwise, and I didn't want you to resent me for forcing us to."

"I had to be the one in charge or else I could blame you and reject you. Did you plan to comfort me after, reassure me that I had no choice?"

"You didn't have a choice, and I still intend to comfort you. Are we not still companions, Will? Who else can you turn to at this moment?"

"No one, but you don't have anyone either. No one else will see you like I do. No one else will feed and house you of their own volition. Tier wanted to use you without consideration for the codependency you desire."

Hannibal's scarecrow mask was never the easiest to decipher and it was harder to feel his emotions when he wasn't fully inside Will, but Will could still tell he was pleased. There was a potent satisfaction in his skull that he knew wasn't coming from himself.

"I don't want another host. Only you, only us."

"Only us," Will agreed. He sighed and pulled Hannibal fully into his embrace, enfolding him in his arms while Hannibal half sank into his chest, wrapping around the bones and muscle of his ribcage. "We'll have to talk more about this later, but why don't we just deal with the mess outside, board up the window, and head to bed?"

"Of course. You can rest, I'll clean up."

"No, I'll stay up until we're done. We're both to blame." Will was the one who lost himself to blind, jealous fury. He wouldn't leave Hannibal to deal with Tier's corpse alone, even if he was the one who put them in that desperate situation in the first place.

Between the two of them, restoring Will's home to its former state went fairly quickly. He'd have to go shopping for new window panels come tomorrow, but for now, the thick tarp he nailed up would do. It certainly helped having as many extra hands as he could want.

Tier's headless and partially hollowed out corpse was another matter.

"I'll take care of it, Will. Do not concern yourself."

"You weren't in control when we bit his head off."

"I brought you to that moment. I would argue that it is my responsibility."

"You're not wrong, but I'm not shying away from this. Are the rest of the organs still good to eat?"

"They seem so. It has not been very long since his decapitation."

"Go for it. I'd prefer to not have to eat someone again for as long as possible."

His words stilled Hannibal's floating head. He didn't emote shock like humans did, especially when in this form, but Will could feel his surprise and a dose of hesitant hope.

"You would hunt with me again? Even a member of your own species?"

"I would — I will," he corrected. Will couldn't deny that it frightened him. Human life was valuable, precious, and he was deciding that it was worth less than his own happiness, his continued existence in this form, but it wasn't only his life he was sacrificing other humans for. Hannibal didn't choose his biology, he wasn't the one who decided he'd be higher up the food chain than the people around them. "But you have to give me some time to...adjust. How long will we be able to last?"

"A week approximately. Two before we end up in the state we were in before. My stores of the chemical I require are quite low at the moment."

"You must've been gorging yourself before I met you. I'm surprised I didn't hear any reports. You tend to leave quite the mess."

He fell quiet again, which Will now knew to mean he was hiding something.

"Have I not heard any reports?"

He sighed, a remarkably human gesture. Will wondered if he picked it up from him.

"You have," he admitted.

"Really? When? What were they?"

"Have we not had enough revelations for one night, Will? I shall be able to explain myself better when we arrive at Quantico tomorrow."

Will could hear the pleading in his tone, and for once, he allowed it. He already knew the worst his alien companion could offer, and it would probably be better to see the entire scope of it in front of him anyway. "Fine, but I *will* be asking you tomorrow. Don't think I'll forget."

"If you do, I'll remind you myself. Despite my actions, I'm not fond of keeping secrets from you."

"Alright, alright. Just finish up with Tier so I can burn whatever's left."

"Of course, Will."

A slick, sickening crunch came from Hannibal's floating head just a moment later. Will should probably have been repulsed, but by now he was used to the sound. It was no different than the normal noises of chewing and swallowing that occurred whenever they ate. Strange how easily a person could get used to the inhuman, though Will would acknowledge his lifelong fascination with the more macabre and blood-filled aspects of humanity.

When Hannibal was finished, they burned the mangled body of Randall Tier and stored the broken pieces of the suit in Will's barn. This would just have to be another unresolved case for the Bureau, but Jack would move onto other killers soon enough without more bodies dropping.

"Come out."

Hannibal hovered over his chest in an instant, unwrapping himself from around Will's bones and organs. It was difficult to see him in the darkness of night, Will could only make out the shadow of him.

"Yes, Will? What is it?"

"C'mere." He wrapped his arms around Hannibal's frame and brought him down to lay with Will on his side. He didn't ask why Will wanted him out, he just snaked a few tentacles around Will's bare ribcage as he settled his no-longer-floating head on the same pillow Will was using.

Will drew him closer as Hannibal tightened his tentacles, both folding each other into an embrace simultaneously.

"I was worried for you. I thought you were dying," Will mumbled. He'd already told Hannibal before, but he felt like his emotions had been running too high at the time to properly discuss what he felt when he saw Hannibal's spasming mass.

"I was. One way or another." His tone was never truly soft, his deep gravelly voice couldn't properly fit the descriptor, but he gave his best imitation of it.

"I was so scared. I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know we could be ripped apart like that." Will rested his forehead against Hannibal's. There wasn't any hard bone to lean against, it was more like the texture of cartilage with ever-shifting ripples dipping in and out of Will's skin.

"I won't allow anyone to separate us again, I swear to you."

"Me neither. I won't let you get away, not even temporarily."

"Did you not enjoy a few minutes of solitude? Before Randall forced us apart of course. I would imagine it was a valuable time to examine the thoughts you do not wish me to pry into."

"I gave up all illusions of privacy when I decided to not attempt to rid myself of you. Private thoughts fester, grow and spread like an infection."

"Yet, you do not see my presence flowing through you as a virus?"

"Not anymore. Didn't you say we were companions?"

"I did." Hannibal curled a thick tentacle to lay across Will's neck — a stable, comforting weight.

"What do you consider 'companions'?"

"Equals. Confidants. A being that can satisfy their other's needs entirely."

Will drew back slightly to press his lips to where his forehead had just lay, right where he pressed them the night he held Hannibal after his nightmare. "I'm not sure companions is the right word for what you're describing." There was a stirring in Will's gut, warm and writhing like the tendrils covering it. He clenched his thighs around the heat that pooled beneath.

"What am I describing, Will?" Hannibal had to know what he was doing, what reactions his movements sparked as he trailed his appendages lower. One snaked around his thigh and pressed in-between his knees. Will couldn't help his shaky exhale.

The word was perched on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't force it past his lips. It ricocheted around his mind though, bouncing off every corner.

Lovers? Hannibal echoed within Will's brain, reflecting what he couldn't say.

"That's usually the label people use when they're comparably close."

"No one has what we do," Hannibal said forcefully, tightening all his appendages. *"There are no comparisons."*

"No, there aren't." Instead of fighting Hannibal's oppressive hold, he sank into it, allowing his whole body to fall into loose relaxation.

"The label of 'lovers' holds certain implications." The tentacle between his knees thickened, forcing his legs slightly apart.

"It does," Will agreed breathlessly. He shifted his thighs against the tentacle, drawing it slightly higher.

"You're not objecting? I am not human, Will. I never will be."

"Do you really think that matters to me? I'm not exactly forming attachments with other humans, am I?"

"I wouldn't stop you, if that was what you desired. There are certainly humans in your life that would not be opposed."

"I don't want any other attachments, they're useless anyway. I want to know what *you* desire." He caressed the side of Hannibal's face, slowly drawing his fingers from Hannibal's temple to his jaw. The basis of his anatomy was similar, but only on the surface. Everything beneath was unknown, but achingly familiar, an extension of him. "What are you feeling now?" Will whispered.

“Anticipation. Warmth. The urge to be closer even though I’m already wrapped around your heart.” Will could feel him there, settled in the valves and arteries, humming along to every stuttering throb. *“I can feel stirrings of an emotion I am unfamiliar with.”*

“Is it a good emotion? We can stop if you want to.” Will hoped he wouldn’t stop. He knew he’d never seek release from anyone else and with his own difficulties shutting off his mind, self-pleasure was difficult, but if Hannibal didn’t or couldn’t feel like he did, Will would resign himself to celibacy. It wasn’t a large price to pay, all things considered. He did his best to squash his hope, to leave his mind a blank slate so Hannibal would tell him his honest thoughts, without attempting to please Will.

“It’s pleasurable. Your brain is producing chemicals I’ve only seen in smaller quantities before. You’re subconsciously reaching for something, but I cannot give it to you if you do not tell me what it is.”

“When have you noticed those chemicals before?”

“When I hold you, when you believe I don’t notice you watching me cook, occasionally when we hunt.”

Will couldn’t deny he felt stirrings at every instance Hannibal described. “I was feeling the same as I am now, just less...directly.”

“Anger desires violence. Sadness desires comfort. What is the goal of this emotion?”

“Pleasure and gratification. You’ve been in enough minds to know what that entails.”

“I do, and I’d like to give you pleasure, Will.” The tentacle brushed higher still, just beneath the juncture of his legs, he could almost feel it brush just below his stiff length. His breath hitched, his exhale came out loud and shaky.

“You don’t...you don’t have to, if you don’t feel it yourself. If it’s not the same for you.”

That Glasgow grin widened — Hannibal’s facsimile of gentleness. *“I feel what you do, my dear. Your pleasure molds into my own.”*

Will had to stop himself from bearing down on the appendage that had crept so close to where he wanted it. He settled for gripping onto the ones that settled upon his waist. “What of *your* desire though?”

“Can’t you feel it? I thought our connection went both ways,” he teased.

Will huffed and turned his attention inward, intentionally feeling for their connection and empathizing as best he could. His own emotions were loud at the moment, but it wasn’t difficult to pick up Hannibal’s as well, though untangling them from his own was always a challenge.

He started with the thread of amusement, knowing it didn’t belong to him, and followed it deeper, feeling how it molded into and weaved around his own desire. It was different

slightly, now that Will was paying close attention, it didn't contain that shred of nervousness and was instead tinged with a different type of emotion that he could not classify.

It was as if Will had been seeing emotions on a graph up until this point, and suddenly he was introduced to something that fell along the Z axis. He didn't know how to explain it.

"What..? What is this?"

"It's unfamiliar to you, yes? My species as a whole are invaders — we find suitable hosts, alien life that can support our biology, take them over, and discard them when we've thoroughly used them, but I don't believe we were initially designed with that intention." He spoke with the reserved fervor of a recent convert, Will could feel a tinge of religious ecstasy in him.

"What were you designed for?"

"Symbiosis. The perfect, ideal, molecular connection between two beings. To seek this type of permanent host is considered a weakness, so much so that the original idea has been relegated to myth, but now I see the truth of it."

You speak of bodily desire — lust — and up until this point I have only caused pain in my hosts, reveled in it, yet you still call to me, ask me with your body and words to satisfy you. How could I deny you? How could I not crave it fervently in turn? When you've given me myth and purpose, the barrier between alien and human want becomes moot." The tentacle in between his legs moved higher still, pressing into him through the fabric of his boxers.

"Hannibal, I—" A sigh stumbled from his lips as the appendage began to move back and forth slowly, a slick slide in between the soft flesh and fabric. "I only want this if we do it *together*. Equals in this and everything else."

"Everything we do, we do as one, my darling. Allow me this sole connection we have not tied yet — you already want it."

"I do." Will squeezed his thighs, bearing down slightly as the burning in his gut mounted. "I want you, you can feel that I do, but you also know why I'm hesitating."

"You're worried that consummation will have separate meanings for us, you fear that even though we connect so deeply, this will be the one instance where we are fundamentally incompatible. I assure you, Will, the gratification you're yearning for is not one sided." Hannibal's voice had dropped to an even lower pitch than usual as he leaned into Will's neck, sending deep vibrations through the delicate skin. His long tongue dripped from his mouth to trail from Will's Adam's apple to his collarbone to the juncture of his shoulder, raising a trail of goosebumps in his wake.

Will hiccuped a gasp once and nodded, acquiescing to what his body wanted and Hannibal was begging him to give in to. He pulled back from his tongue and tentacles quickly to push down the bed covers and shuck off his boxers, tossing them aside carelessly.

He watched Hannibal with careful attention as he laid his back on the bed and, after a beat of not-quite hesitation, allowed his knees to fall open on either side of him.

Hannibal's tongue and appendages were on him the moment he stopped shifting. Several small tentacles worked their way around his thighs, pushing them even further apart while another poked at his entrance. It was slick, leaving a thin sheen of warm liquid on his skin. He hadn't realized Hannibal's body was capable of it, but he was freely able to manipulate himself, so honestly Will shouldn't be surprised.

Before he was even breached, he watched as his cock was encased in a warm, red mass, holding him perfectly and giving him a tight passage to fuck into. Will sighed, not yet a moan, but already felt more turned on and held than he had in his entire life.

He didn't have to ask which spots he wanted touched, what actions would leave him sensitive and writhing, Hannibal just knew. He even knew about areas Will hadn't consciously been aware of.

Two more tentacles slithered up his torso to massage at the flesh of his chest while the one between his legs finally pushed inside. It didn't go far, just testing the give as it swirled inside him. The two on his chest pulled and kneaded the muscle as they slowly circled towards his nipples, eliciting a quick cry when they finally made direct contact.

"So sensitive, my dear. It's as if you've never been touched before." The tentacle inside him pressed further, reaching deeper easily. It was thin, so the intrusion didn't hurt like he expected, but he could feel every inch as it slowly moved.

"H-haven't. Not like this." His exhale was shaky and cracked. "Not there."

"Then I am honored to be your first." Will could almost hear the implied *'and last.'*

The sleeve around his cock didn't move, and he didn't buck into it. Frenzy had not taken hold yet as Hannibal continued his careful explorations, and Will was content to let him work for now. He was still stiff and he knew he'd begun to leak, but he wanted to feel Hannibal entirely, once his body was ready to take more of him.

The tentacle flicked around his passage until it struck the bundle of nerves that had Will's body jolting out of relaxed reservation. It struck again and wiggled in deeper, widening slightly as it went. Will was panting slightly and felt his cock twitch within the warmth.

Slowly the sleeve encasing him began to move, stroking up and down in steady motions while it lightly vibrated at the head. Will's thighs began to shake, and he knew he'd approach the edge far too soon. It wasn't that Hannibal was fucking him quickly, he was just hitting every sensitive area with precision, using the exactly right motions that would make Will sprint to his peak.

As focused as he was on the movement of the sleeve, he didn't notice the second thin tentacle at his entrance until it had already pushed its way inside.

Taking both of them was so much more intense than just taking the one — exponential, not additive. They danced around each other, pulling at his slick insides. Hannibal licked his way back up Will's neck and forced his long tongue into Will's gasping mouth. Immediately, he touched the back of Will's throat, but his gag reflex never went off — Hannibal must have repressed it in order to allow his tongue to slither down his esophagus.

With his throat relaxed and fervor building, he didn't worry about having to breathe until it became an issue. He sucked on Hannibal's tongue, trying to place the taste of his flesh but finding himself unable to. Will's own, much smaller tongue tried its best to keep up, impart its own caresses, but at best he was barely licking the underside of the intrusion that was still sliding down his throat.

He gasped as Hannibal withdrew from his mouth, letting him up for air before pushing back in. This time, Will could feel some of him sinking beyond the walls of his esophagus, to Will's lungs where he could inflate them as Will forgot how, forcing him to breathe through his nose around the tongue that was intent on staying inside him.

The tentacles on his chest curled and squeezed while the ones between his legs pumped in and out of him faster. He couldn't gasp and he could barely groan, but his hands were still free to grip the appendages pinching his nipples — not to pull them away, but to anchor himself.

Apparently, Hannibal decided that he would be the one holding Will down, not the other way around. Two more maroon tentacles dove at his wrists from his ever-shifting mass and forced them over his head. With the tentacles on his thighs still pressing them widely apart, he was now completely presented, spread wholly so Hannibal could take whatever he desired. It was clear now that Will never should have worried about these feelings not being mutual, because Hannibal clearly had a design he wanted to shape Will into.

He arched his back off the bed, feeling his cock begin to twitch and spasm as all of his sensitive nerves were stimulated at once. Hannibal wasn't done with him yet though, and he couldn't cry out to protest as the grip on his cock turned harsh, restrictive.

Will froze as a tiny tentacle rubbed at the slit of his cock before pressing inside gently. He couldn't fight or protest, and he didn't want to risk jerking his hips, so all he could do was try to repress his shaking limbs as the thin tentacle reached further inside.

It connected with his prostate, now stimulated from multiple angles. If he wasn't plugged up and stopped by Hannibal's stranglehold, he would've finished already, a few times over. As it was, the heat just continued to build. His gut ached for release, but there was none to be had until Hannibal allowed it.

The two tentacles writhing inside him began to calm, halt, and withdraw until they were both just inside his entrance. They pulled apart slowly, spreading his hole wide, wider than he thought it could go. The stretch burned, but their fervent movement and the slick slide had prepped him thoroughly, though he wasn't sure what for.

The answer was obvious a moment later when a thick, blunt tentacle poked at his gaping hole.

Try as he could, there was no way to protest and he knew that in his mind, where Hannibal could hear his shouted subconscious clear as day, there was no true desire to get away. He relaxed, best he could, knowing the tentacle would be forced into him still if he clenched. From this angle, he couldn't see the shape and size, only feeling the blunt head pressing up against his slick entrance.

Hannibal removed his tongue from Will's throat the instant he began to sink inside, allowing the punched-out groan to fill the room entirely. Will could feel him purr and rumble, delighting in the noises Will was producing from his strained throat.

The head finally slipped inside him, but the rest of the intrusion wasn't much thinner. He pushed in again, sooner than Will was consciously ready for and he felt another bump, forcing him wider still. Hannibal finally unblocked his vision and Will could see the entire appendage was ridged, thick, and *long*. If Hannibal wanted to force it all inside him it would reach his colon easily.

"H-han- no I *can't*!" Will tried to protest, though the burning in his gut and the image in his only wanted the intrusion more.

"*You can, love.*" He pushed again, forcing another ridge inside, thicker than the last.

The moan that left him was nearly a shout. He was already so *full* and there was still so much more left to take. Hannibal was relentless, not just as he carved out Will's entrance, but every other tentacle in and around him was moving as well.

The tiny, tight ones around his nipples began to flick and suck, the one inside his cock was twisting and thrusting slightly. When he let out another strangled moan as the next larger ridge entered him, that tongue entered his mouth once more. Without hesitation, Hannibal began fucking his throat with the extended muscle, feeling like he was reaching deeper and deeper every time.

Will had no idea how he was still breathing when it felt like that tongue was reaching his stomach, he also had no idea how his rim hadn't started to bleed when Hannibal began relentlessly fucking into him with the full length of the appendage.

Each ridge pulled at him, forcing him to spread around it and accept it inside. Tears sprang from the corners of his eyes, though they weren't from any pain, at least not any pain that was distinguishable from overwhelming pleasure.

The tentacles holding his thighs spread them even wider, making him really feel the stretch. His thighs began to tremble in their hold, but their grip was tight, they needed to hold him open when the thick tentacle reshaping his insides fucked inside him faster and faster.

Another soft tendril laid upon his lower stomach gently while the press of every other was rough and punishing. It pressed down slightly and Will realized that it was feeling how Will's belly was bulging out a bit with every single thrust.

The restraint around Will's cock and the one plugging him up suddenly retreated and he came apart at once in a violent burst. Hannibal retracted his tongue and Will let out a long, wrecked

sob as his orgasm washed over him in wave upon wave. It felt like his release was being sucked out of him by the appangage encasing him and a moment later, as the tentacle fucking him stilled within in at its deepest point — he felt a warm wetness coat his insides.

His breathing was stuttered and hiccuped, he cried out a few more times as all the tentacles left his body. Hannibal was quick to replace the warmth though, to wrap Will's cooling body in a blanketing mass of himself. He hummed and purred and formed a small head so he could lay gentle licks along Will's neck.

Will pulled him closer as his breathing began to even. He felt boneless and sated entirely. He expected his body to feel achy and used, with a few bruises on his thighs and wrists, but he couldn't detect any pain, only bone-deep satisfaction.

"God, we should have done that sooner."

"You have a few fairly depraved desires, Will. I was quite surprised to see some of the urges hiding in your subconscious."

"I'd say you did a pretty good job at drawing them out. Is there a reason I don't feel worse?"

"I can manipulate your body freely, and I see no reason to cause you undue pain. Your pleasure is far sweeter."

Will curled himself up tighter, pulling up his knees so Hannibal would be as close to his center as possible. He was about to drift off when he felt a cool wetness on his backside. Adrenaline had receded far enough that he could think again and question it.

"Hannibal...did you fuck me with my own come?"

His symbiote had the nerve to laugh, that deep, guttural sound. Will knew he should be offended, but that was a problem for a future Will that wasn't so intent on sleeping at the moment.

"Am I going to recognize them?"

"Most definitely."

"You didn't even flip through my memories, are you sure?" Will reclined in his seat as Hannibal took the wheel, nursing his travel coffee mug.

"I am positive. There are...aspects of the way I used to behave with my other hosts that I have not divulged to you yet. I promise that it will become clear once you can see the files."

"I'm just surprised that you kept this out of the media's attention for so long. People love a good boogeyman story, and I've witnessed enough of your kills to know what to look for. I have a pretty decent memory and I'm not finding any matches."

“As I said, my behavior changed when I met you. Killing used to be all I lived for, it's what my species was built to do after all. It was how I survived and how I found my amusement.”

Will fell silent. He'd promised both Hannibal and himself that he wouldn't be shocked by what he saw or what his symbiote did before he came to Will, but he couldn't help his internal flinch at Hannibal's words, said so plainly, as if killing were a similar pastime to taking up and setting aside fingerpainting.

Perhaps it was to him. Grizzly bears often played with the trout they caught — cruel amusement was a part of nature. How could Will reproach him if Hannibal had never known it was wrong?

Was it wrong, really? Where did the boundary between acts of nature and humanity blur? How was he supposed to know which side of the line an alien lifeform landed?

It hurt his head to consider, so he pushed his moral dilemma to the side as Hannibal pulled them into the parking lot — luckily there were stalls, so he didn't have to attempt to parallel park along the street.

Jack caught him before he could make it down to the record room. “Tier wasn't at his home, but we have more than enough to convict him. We have officers stationed around to see if he tries to return, but he hasn't tried to come back yet.”

“Is the suit still missing? Have any ‘animal attacks’ been reported?” Will asked, as if he didn't already know what became of Tier's charred pieces of flesh and his mangled suit.

“Nothing so far.”

Will could see Jack's clear frustration. He was well aware of how the man operated — his strict sense of justice meant the ends always justified the means, even if that meant more bodies had to drop before the case was solved.

“I'll keep an eye out,” Will promised, even though he knew Tier's organs were still being digested in his gut while the rest of him was buried white-gray ash. “Anything else? I was just about to head down to records.”

“What for? I need you ready to go as soon as we have anything.”

“Well, we don't have anything right now. Figured I'd poke around some unsolves, see if anything pops out.”

Jack nodded, Will felt oddly like a child who'd been praised when his parent found out he spent his free time studying. “Take a look at the Dollmakers' case while you're down there. It worries me that they've been quiet for so long.”

“I thought they took that out of the BSU's jurisdiction?”

Jack had to know they weren't equipped to handle a case of that scale and magnitude, that it would be better off handled by a sector with better equipment and more trained personnel

rather than the detectives of the BSU, but he knew that in Jack's eyes, it was still counted as a failure.

"They have as many leads as we did. Just look it over, Will." With that, he retreated to his office. Will never understood how he was able to manage so much constantly, the long line of people under his command — he performed the role much better than Will ever could.

He quickly shuffled down to records and made sure he was alone before he softly spoke. "All right, what am I looking for?"

Wrong section. Hannibal directed him further back, outside the BSU's section. Will's gut dropped as he saw what they were headed for. One quick tentacle darted out and grabbed what was probably the thickest file there. The folder was bulging so badly that it needed to be banded shut. The pages were worn with frequent use and Will could already see a few bloody photos spilling out the sides. He recognized more than a couple.

"...you're joking."

I would not joke about this. I promised to give you the truth.

Will flipped open the Dollmakers' file. The first page contained a body — hollowed out as every 'doll' was, missing every internal organ. This one was posed as if she were dancing in a ballet. The next page had another hollowed victim, staged in a church in his pastor's robes, giving a sermon. The next was a university student hunched over a textbook, the next a man fishing standing upright. All hollow.

He dropped to his knees and folded his legs under him as he reclined against one of the many filing cabinets.

Will? There was a hint of nervousness in Hannibal's voice.

"Just trying to take it all in. That certainly answers a few questions though."

The Dollmakers had become something of a semi-local legend — more of a nightmare to the people in the area. There were tons of victims, as many as multiple a week, and this had been going on for a fair amount of time.

Or it had been, until just a few months ago. Will realized now that it was correlated to Hannibal's crash that landed him in the woods of Wolf Trap.

The best explanation the FBI still had was cult activity, but Will could see now how far off they'd been. They'd never lacked evidence — the problem always was that whoever's DNA they'd find at the previous scenes would always wind up as a hollowed out victim too.

He flipped through more photos — body after body after body. Hannibal had certainly had his fun. He'd even worked his way through a few of the beat cops that were often on scene first.

Hannibal formed under his clothing and wrapped around his midsection, holding him just a tad too tight. Will could feel his equivalent of nervousness building as Will perused without a

word.

“You made previous hosts kill, you used their hands to play with the corpses, and for their service you ate your hosts as well.” Despite his words, Will’s voice was neutral, which was only ramping up the foreign anxiety he could detect.

Yes. Hannibal didn’t try to defend himself. The evidence was overwhelming though — Will wasn’t sure that he could.

“This was your ‘amusement’?”

For a while. I enjoy the pastimes we do together now.

“More than making these?”

He fell silent again, but Will had time to wait for him to speak.

It took a while, but eventually he broke. *I miss it sometimes*, he admitted reluctantly. *It felt like...art. Humanity is fascinating. I didn’t love humans, I still don’t — with one exception — but it was amusing to attempt to imitate them. Sometimes I would try to impersonate my hosts’ lives for a few days before I ate them.*

“Why was I different? How come you didn’t turn me into one of these?”

I’m not sure. I was going to when I saw you, I don’t know what made me want to observe your brain before swallowing it.

“Really? Was it just a coincidence?”

I think it might have been because I noticed you suffering.

Will didn’t have a response to that, he just raised a brow and waited for Hannibal to continue.

I’ve seen and caused a lot of suffering, it’s fascinating the way a creature’s behavior will shift at the pained point near death. Humans are creative, their responses are unique, but you, your body wanted to believe it was near-death at all times. Constantly on the knife’s edge. There was so much fear and loneliness and uncertainty, all being stewed in a boiling broth. For once, I didn’t want to make it worse. I felt like I could, but your brain wouldn’t have been able to conjure up any new terrors at my hands, at least not if I used the means I had to torment every other human host I resided in.

“Should I be flattered that my pain was so enticing?”

Not necessarily. I’m not trying to win you over here, Will. I’m simply telling the truth. You peaked my interest, I decided to curb my desires for the moment, then you showed me what life could hold. I never knew I was missing such vast swatches of it.

He flipped through a few more pictures. More empty-socketed people stared back at him, grotesquely imitating their own lives. “They’re beautiful, in a way.” Any horror he expected to feel at this moment was curiously missing. The scenes weren’t malicious, he never thought

the dolls were meant to be, even if they were utterly terrifying to most. Though, that had been an observation he kept to himself.

That being said, Hannibal wasn't as unfeeling as a storm. He clearly delighted in human suffering — he said so himself. It had been what had drawn him to Will in the first place.

Beautiful? His voice was quiet, yet still packed with gravel, though a tinge of hope softened the edges.

“Yeah. They say imitation is the highest form of flattery, I think you were fascinated by more than suffering.”

How so?

“You painted the mundane. These are depictions of your victims' lives from their own memories. You claim to hold no love for humanity, but I do not see disdain here either.”

I didn't love them. I didn't know what love was, but I was...curious. Interested. Yours has not been the first planet I resided on, did you know?

“I didn't, though I suspected. Were you an invader there too?”

I was. I killed, ate, and played with my food as others of my species did until the life that had once been there was decimated, and then I moved on, as is our custom. I was the 'scout' for this planet, to see if it was hospitable. We were set to ravage this place as well.

“What stopped you?”

The same thing that stopped me from consuming you. Suffering. Humans struggle so much, there's so much vitality at the point of death. I didn't want to see that spirit shattered under the crushing desolation of a mass execution that could not be avoided. I found a playground, and I did not want to share.

“And that's all we were to you — playthings?”

This upsets you. He sounded resigned, a tad disappointed, but not surprised. He probably expected Will to be horrified, he was responsible for killing many, *many* humans, and still had the possibility of wiping out the species as a whole. Honestly, why *wouldn't* Will be horrified?

A shiver went down Will's spine, though he knew it wasn't fear that was stirring in his gut. He was feeling a whole myriad of emotions, but horror wasn't among them.

“Not necessarily. You're not human, why should you abide by human morality?”

He felt Hannibal slither up from his midsection towards his neck, where he sank inside. He continued upwards, settling into the folds of his brain. “You know, if you're confused you could just ask me instead of trying to figure out what I'm thinking.”

Fine, he huffed. *I do not understand why you are responding so calmly.*

Will leaned his head back a little too fast so it would clatter against the storage cabinets. The contact never came. That protective red mass covered the back of his skull so a soft cushion would catch him.

“It’s simple. You’re not going to hurt me, right?”

Never.

“And you’re not going to report back to your species?”

No, I would prefer this place to remain untainted.

“Then why shouldn’t I be calm?” He picked up the photos and fanned them like a flush of cards. “Torture like this isn’t necessarily a new concept. Hyenas will eat their prey alive from the inside out. Dolphins will tear off the limbs of squid and use their dying bodies to play catch, without any interest in eating them. Human children will burn ants and rip the wings off butterflies, simply because they’re curious. People are the ones with certain moral standards, oftentimes ones we don’t even abide by. Why should I fault you, who is not human, for failing to abide by them?”

You will place your faith in me? Just like that?

“Are you trying to convince me otherwise?”

No, I’m simply remembering what a unique specimen you are. Will could feel the open and honest affection leak through both their bond and internal tone that curled around the space between his brain and skull.

“Unique enough to not turn me into one of these?” Perhaps his desensitization had reached a worrying state. No person should be able to see the sheer volume and disfiguration of the bodies he was looking at and not be downright horrified. Yet, he couldn’t bring himself to care too deeply about the hollowed out victims. Not when he’d already resolved to keep his symbiote with him.

It’s not like he didn’t have a choice now. He knew how to purge Hannibal from his body if he wanted.

“...Why did you show me this, Hannibal?”

You asked me to, he replied, as if it really was that simple.

“You gave me the motive and method to rid myself of you, kill you even. You could’ve kept this hidden from me, even if I demanded to know. There’s enough loss of human life here to justifiably be called a massacre, and these aren’t the only ones, are they?”

No, they aren’t. I’m unsure of the true total.

“The only reasonable thing for a person to do would be to kill you, if they were able. I don’t fault your proclivities, what nature has demanded you take for your survival, and I don’t fault

your lack of empathy for a species that's not your own, but humans tend to destroy any entities that cause even much smaller losses of life."

I'm the only one of my species on your planet, Will. None will follow me if I do not report back, which I do not intend to. You could rid your entire species of this parasite, save countless lives and take vengeance for countless others, if you wanted to.

"Symbiote," Will corrected. "I could, but I'm not going to. Let's go somewhere without cameras, I want to see you."

Warmth didn't come naturally to his invader — he always seemed a tad thrown when tenderness bloomed between his blood red appendages, but the feeling was becoming common, if it hadn't already in the previous weeks.

You're not going to? That familiar warmth and unfamiliar confusion laced through their connection. It drew a soft smile to Will's face that had the clerk of the records counter looking at him funny. Will just gave her a friendly nod and began to head to his office.

"Nope." He popped the 'P'. Despite knowing he was technically able to, he didn't consider forcing Hannibal from his body for a second.

Why?

"The same reason you decided to tell me the truth. Do you have a clear reason?" He turned into his office and locked the door. Hannibal spread out from him in a few directions. His scarecrow mask formed, staying close to Will, while a few tentacles shot out to straighten the pens and papers on Will's desk. "And don't just say 'because I asked you to'."

"Then no, Will. I do not have one. Nothing concrete except..."

"Except?" He sat down at his desk and intertwined his fingers with the small tentacles. The wove in between his knuckles, dipping in and out of his skin.

"You loved me. I'd known about the feeling conceptually, but never experienced it firsthand. I hadn't realized I was capable of having it, either received or able to give to another. I've lived a very long time, my Will. I hadn't known how monotonous it all had become until I took harbor in your body. This life with you is all that I desire, but your true, unabashed companionship, without your trust, it's only a life half-lived."

"Love. Not 'loved'. Current. You haven't changed that, and I'm not selfless enough to put the needs of humanity above my own. Maybe before, when everything I had was tied to the lives I was expected to save — you said I was dying, I think I kind of expected the work to kill me. But now? I think I've begun to realize that I never really cared much for other people. Blood and the stench of corpses has always been more familiar than the breathing bodies pointing me in their direction. I think my life was also only half-lived, without the ability and the realized desire for true connection."

"And I have not severed it? That 'true connection' we share? Does your answer still stay resolute if I said I still harbored those desires, that I still see humans and wonder what

beautiful configurations I could mold their bodies into?" That warmth hadn't receded, but he was vacillating wildly between unguarded trust and his attempts to frighten Will, to test his resolve.

"I'm not scared of you, sweetheart," he said placatingly. He reached towards Hannibal's floating head — he came to Will with only a moment of hesitation. "I'm not sure I was ever afraid of you in earnest." He pressed his thumb down on one of Hannibal's shark teeth until a small bead of blood bubbled to the surface. Immediately, Hannibal trailed his long, wide tongue out and licked away the blood. When he pulled away, there wasn't a single shred of evidence that the wound existed in the first place.

Will coughed, attempting to dull the redness of his cheeks when he remembered what the tongue was actually capable of.

"Anyways, no, you haven't severed it. But, even if we're going to kill, we can't kill like you have been. I'm not going to allow you to endanger us, and you won't have another body to escape to if we become compromised. Honestly, it's a miracle that you weren't found before this point — half the FBI is still scrambling for an explanation." With how many hosts he'd had and how many bodies he'd left, someone had to get close eventually. Even if he had the benefit of swapping bodies whenever he wanted, the sheer number of victims could give him a difficult constraint to work around.

"There were a few that got close, that found the body I was currently residing in before I could move on. I have to say, it's quite easy to eat your problems though. You should try it some time."

"When I have you to eat them for me?"

Hannibal didn't respond, he just cocked his head minutely.

"Or we could eat them together, I guess." There was no real reluctance in Will's voice, just mild trepidation.

"Will you? I told you before that we need not hunt together when we have to consume prey that's higher up the food chain."

"No, we'll do it together, or not at all." Will sighed and leaned back in his chair until he was looking up at the ceiling. "God, you're a terror. Real nightmare fuel, huh? I have no idea where I'd be without you."

"If I recall our states when we met, I'd say we would both be dead by now."

Will smiled as Hannibal floated over him, blocking the overhead light like an eclipse. "One way or another," he laughed.

Because of the nature of his work, some weeks were busier than others. Sometimes they would be dealing with multiple killers a week, other times months would go by without a

new set of bodies gracing Will's desk.

The week following Tier's death was slow, at least on Will's end. Pressure from higher-ups and the victim's families was pushing Jack to find the man-beast whose remains were in Will's digestive tract and buried in his backyard. The man was frustrated, but at least he knew that Will wouldn't be able to provide anymore help without new evidence surfacing, so he was off the hook for once.

The only problem though, was that it had been ten days since they'd eaten Randall Tier. Hannibal's need for nightly hunts in the forest of Wolf Trap had lessened — their hunger was far more satiated from the one human meal than weeks of the woodland creatures.

They still went into the woods a couple times during the week, running down a few deer, but that dull ache still grew stronger with each passing day, especially now that Will knew exactly what would alleviate it.

"Will?"

He sighed, knowing what Hannibal was tentatively trying to approach. He hadn't been hounding him or insisting repeatedly. In fact, this was the first time he was going to bring up their ever-present craving since he'd directed Will towards his file.

"I know."

"It's only going to get worse," he reminded him, not to threaten — he didn't need to. The hunger, and what it would eventually turn him into, was a certainty.

"I know," Will repeated, still unsure what he was going to do about it. He'd had a week and a half to get used to the idea that he would be eating humans for the foreseeable future and the problem wasn't that there wasn't enough time for him to digest the concept. No, the issue was that he adjusted too quickly, and now the rumble of his stomach had him eyeing the heads of common passers-by and wondering how they would taste. "I haven't... *picked* someone yet." This would set a precedent for them, how they would live from here on out.

"You desire a human that is deserving?"

"There aren't many out there that would truly deserve a death sentence." Did Hobbs deserve to be executed by his hand? Will had been praised for that kill, so the state decided that was a death earned. Did he deserve to kill Tier? If the FBI found the charred remains of his corpse, Will would be reprimanded at the very least, but more likely suspended and tried. Was that kill then not deserved?

Did he even care?

"Your head is spinning, Will. You're running circles around yourself."

"It's not an easy decision to make. Taking a life shouldn't be done lightly, and it's not as simple as one person deserving it over another."

"I did not realize you cared for your fellow man so much as to be so conflicted. From your words before, I believed you cared very little."

Will fell silent, unsure of what to say, how to defend or explain himself, if he even could. *Did* he even want to? His empathy had never been so hypothetically oriented.

"Do you care?"

"I'm not sure," he sighed, pressing his palms into his eyes.

"May I make a suggestion, then?"

"You can, I might not take it though."

"Let's go into the city. Tonight. You need not make a decision at any point, and perhaps we may not actually hunt, but it would be a better alternative to arguing with yourself."

There were only two options he had for the future — to kill and let them continue living, or to not and allow Hannibal to starve to death. Will knew he wouldn't survive on his own anymore, even if Hannibal was able to restrain himself from eating Will's organs when he had no other options. But really, it wasn't his own death that frightened him.

He couldn't bear the thought of Hannibal dying, which meant that someone else, or quite a few someone elses, had to take his place.

"Alright," he said quietly. At least he wouldn't be forced to make a decision right at that moment.

They ran into the city. No sense in bringing a car — they were far more easily tracked than people realized — but they both had also missed the pleasure of running together, existing in that hulking form.

Baltimore was still a skittish city by that point, though in the months-long break between discovered hollowed out dolls, people had begun to settle once again.

It wasn't so long ago that Will had been listening to radio warnings to stay at home at night and to be more wary of strangers and to please report any suspicious activities to his local authorities, but despite the drawn out massacre, people still desired to continue on with their daily lives. There were still calls made by paranoid people locking themselves in their homes, but overall, people still just went to work, returned home, went drinking with their friends, frequented parks and shopping centers, and generally just continued on with their lives. And it's not like the greater Baltimore area wouldn't recover from the loss of life — it had more than enough citizens to fill the gaps left by Hannibal's desire to keep himself fed and amused.

Though, as he said, people were still skittish. The incident was still fresh in citizens' minds, well fresh enough to have people glancing over their shoulders when they walked at night.

It was just on the cusp of sunset when they arrived in the city. Will walked them downtown where people were either bustling home from their day jobs and after work obligations or getting ready to start their nights out. No one really paid attention to the man sitting at the far end of a bus stop, mumbling into his ear buds as he pretended to look at his phone.

“I’m not feeling any more ready for this now then when we were at home.”

I did not expect you to. Very little has changed since then. The added presence of other humans won’t solve your moral dilemma.

“Then what’s the point of us being here?”

To have a discussion. Also, it can be refreshing to leave the house once in a while.

“So we’re not even going to try to hunt?”

We can, but that all depends on you, Will. I’m not the one with qualms over eating a member of your species.

Will slumped down into the bench, throwing his head back to clatter against the backrest, but just finding Hannibal’s soft, protective cushion.

“So we’re back to square one.”

Not necessarily. A woman with straight hair and a thick parka walked past them and sat a few benches down. Why not her?

“She hasn’t done anything,” Will said quietly, keeping his voice low and directed into his chest.

So we go after criminals then? I thought you said you had no interest in being vigilantes.

“I don’t.”

Then why the hesitation?

“I...I don’t know.”

He thought Hannibal might be upset or disappointed, but he didn’t feel any negative emotions through their bond. *Why don’t we go for a walk?*

Will gratefully relinquished control of his legs and allowed Hannibal to let them wander around side streets and back alleys, weaving through old brick buildings and tall offices.

“Are we going anywhere specific?”

Not particularly. Do we need to be?

“No, but it's all starting to feel a bit pointless.”

Hannibal hummed in his head, as if trying to find a way to settle the nerves in Will's chest without drugging him. *Do you have a fear of heights, Will?*

"Not at the moment," Will replied warily.

It is not my intention to inspire fear now, my dear. Just trust me.

Will barely nodded before he was entirely enveloped. They were just off the main road, in the shadows between street lamps in an empty alleyway. There was no one around to see them, but Will still felt an anxious lurch in his stomach that was entirely separate from the drop it gave when Hannibal shot them up the side of the building.

Baltimore wasn't the type of city for soaring skyscrapers, but the office they scaled was easily ten stories tall, and he didn't stop until they were at the very top.

Will had said he wasn't afraid of heights, but anyone would be a bit nervous when they were sitting on a very slanted roof near the edge of a drop that would surely kill them.

"Darling, a simple fall could not kill you. There is not much that can at this point." Hannibal retracted their combined form until Will's torso was exposed, though he left their legs combined — they needed some sort of purchase on the angled roof.

"You can't blame me for being nervous. It's instinctual."

"Fight those instincts then. Those ones are no longer of use to you."

Will felt a small pressure under his chin, drawing his head to tilt up from its rigid position staring at the ground.

"Look up, love."

Slowly, reluctantly, he flicked his eyes higher, severing the anxious thoughts as soon as he caught a glimpse at Hannibal's floating head. Stars had begun to dot the sky, almost like tiny reflections of the city lights below. Hannibal's maroon pulsing flesh was backlit by both speckles of light, reflecting on his slick skin.

He knew Hannibal was trying to show him the city, how the warm glow from the nightlife blended into the blue-black sky, but the only color in Will's eyes was red.

"There you are." His scarecrow grin stretched wide. *"Fear cannot touch you up here, can it?"*

Will smiled back, warm and satisfied. "Couldn't be further away," he agreed.

They reached together simultaneously, closing the already negligible distance. Thin tentacles weaved through Will's fingers while Hannibal formed a semi-solid mass in order to perch in Will's lap as they watched the evening skyline.

"I still don't know what I'm going to do," Will mumbled, less worried than before, but the uncertainty hadn't faded.

“In which aspect does your hesitation lie?”

“The finality of it, I guess. What it will make me if I do this.”

“You’ve killed before, with and without me. Why would you be anything different now having taken a life again?” The tentacles covering Will’s hands moved slightly, holding and caressing him.

“Because I’ll enjoy it,” he confessed.

“You enjoyed it before,” he shot back.

“Yeah, that’s how I know I’ll enjoy it now. It’ll be with intention.”

“Where the others you could have written off as happenstance.”

Will nodded, just once, but Hannibal noticed every small movement of his body.

“Were they?”

He shrugged. He’d thought they were at the time, but with some self-reflection he wasn’t so sure. At least Hannibal wouldn’t judge him for admitting that perhaps he’d meant to kill those two people, even when he could barely admit it to himself.

A car alarm went off in the alley below them. Will looked down to see a young man fleeing the sound, going further into the dark alley. Before he was fully conscious of what he was doing, he was following him — Hannibal having already had the foresight to cover their body before they began the pursuit.

He didn’t think, and Hannibal didn’t offer either encouragement or discouragement. They crawled along the side of the building, using their claws and the cloying red tentacles to keep them clung to the vertical walls. They moved silently, for the most part, as they kept pace with the young carjacker.

Will wasn’t sure what his intent was. He wasn’t sure when he moved their body and he still wasn’t sure when they caught up to him — perched still as a statue in the shadows, a mere ten feet above him. Will could see his face now, panting from the run with a wide smile, excited that he apparently hadn’t been caught.

He hesitated. Hungry, but empathetic and confused. Hannibal began to whisper behind his ears. *Think of how his brain will taste, love.* A tentacle pressed into his slightly concave stomach. *Just this one and the pain will go away.* A spot of drool leaked from their mouth as Will remembered the taste of fresh viscera, warm and intoxicating as it slid across their wide tongue. The drool dropped harmlessly upon the ground, and the carjacker did not seem to notice it.

The young man, barely more than a boy, had slumped down now — his head gently hit the wall behind him. There wasn’t a shred of guilt on his lightly smiling face.

Will silently turned them around and crawled back up the building.

Hannibal retracted from his skin the moment they were alone on the dark balcony of some unoccupied apartment. Still, Will could detect no disappointment blooming in him through their bond.

"You retreated, darling."

"I did," Will said into his knees.

"Yet you were the one that gave chase." Hannibal pried his head up from where it was buried, running a few tentacles through his hair.

"I don't know why I did. I just moved."

"You spoke of instincts earlier, perhaps this is simply another one. When a predator spots prey fleeing, their instinct is not to flee, but to pursue. Though I get the sense that that boy was not the prey you wanted."

"I feel like I'm going to make excuses for every person I see, but I...I couldn't. He was so young, I could feel his excitement, the small shot of adrenaline in his spine."

"Perhaps it was wise to leave him then. Adrenaline comes with a bitter aftertaste."

Will couldn't help but laugh at that, a full-on peal that didn't peter out until he was snorting. Hannibal hadn't been joking, and perhaps this whole situation was more than a bit deranged, but it only fueled the half-crazed gasps that left his lips.

"I'm going to kill us both, aren't I?" He was still smiling wide and resigned, despite his words.

"I shall not allow it to come to that. If we become in danger of starvation, I will detach myself from you before the hunger becomes lethal."

"Like hell I'm letting you die either."

Hannibal rumbled gently, which might have been his version of a laugh as well, though Will couldn't entirely be sure. *"Then we seem to be stuck again. There are still a few more days before we become truly ravenous, should we head home?"*

Will didn't want to. He wanted the taste of flesh and blood and organs to sate the pangs in their stomach, but if he couldn't bring himself to consume a person, what else could he do but retreat?

He hauled himself over the railing, knowing their legs would be strong enough to survive the impact by the time they fell through the four story drop.

The landed gracefully and Hannibal retracted mostly back into him, except for a few thick tentacles that were wrapped tightly around Will's midsection. He hummed within Will's head, some haunting operetta that he'd played while he was cooking a couple days ago.

Despite the lingering hunger, Will felt his anxiety drift away. He still had Hannibal, he wasn't upset, and there was still that easy affection between them. Will rubbed his hand along his middle, just to feel him. When he dropped his hand and wiggled his fingers at his side, Hannibal didn't hesitate before manifesting a few appendages to weave in between them — holding Will's hand as only he could.

There was a pocketknife in his jacket pocket. He didn't need it really, everything that he'd used it for was now far more easily accomplished by one sharp tentacle, but it was still a comforting weight. He held it in his opposite hand as they wandered through the back alleys, not in any rush to go home yet. He'd begun to quite enjoy their walk now that there were no looming expectations.

"How long can we last on animals?" Will asked while they wandered, not even pretending to speak into his phone.

A week before true starvation sets in, two before I will make myself leave your body to prevent myself from eating your organs. But Will, I have to say that it will be painful the entire time. You have surely already noticed our body beginning to weaken.

He had, obviously. They weren't running as quick as he was used to, and he knew the reason that Hannibal retreated into his skin so quickly was to conserve energy. He wasn't exactly hiding it.

That left him with seven days at most with a clear head. After that, and likely before, his indecision would be stolen by the desire of his body to continue on living.

He stopped at the edge at the alleyway, taking a dazed moment to remember the taste of Tier's blood sliding down his throat. The moment he'd smelled it, no indecision had gripped him, he just moved.

Will almost wished for that same instinctual assault, his higher thoughts completely taken over by the need for violence and the need to eat.

What was stopping him anyway?

He felt the knife in his hand and ran his thumb across the blade. There was a question posed at the edge of his senses that Hannibal hadn't formed into words yet, but Will could feel it lingering in the folds of his brain.

Prey so easily folded under their powerful limbs. In their combined form they were near-untouchable, literally otherworldly as Hannibal wasn't born on Earth's soil. Will enjoyed the power it gave, but he knew the power was borrowed, only partially his own.

He didn't know why that thought bothered him, but when they were poised above that young man, Will knew that if he had just looked up, there was no chance that he would've escaped and that Will wouldn't have even been bruised in the skirmish.

It was late now. The sky had fully darkened and though the street lights carved paths of yellow glow into the streets, there were still many patches of shadow to hide in. Will flipped

up his hood and pulled the drawstrings tighter, covering his face more thoroughly. He wasn't feeling the chill, though it was still midwinter, but he just felt that he wanted his face covered.

He stood still at the mouth of the alley, fully encased by the shade of the surrounding buildings. The only movement was the light *shick* of the knife in his hand, opening and closing. A soft *shh* sighed from Will's lips before Hannibal could ask. Will didn't know the answer, he didn't know what he was doing right now, just that any words would break the *reviere*.

His ears pricked as he heard the sound of dress shoes on the sidewalk pavement. He stayed motionless, not frozen — poised. Hannibal's confusion was clear though their bond, but he remained inside Will's skin.

A man, mid-forties, in a crumpled suit, stepped into view. Time seemed to slow down to half speed, then a quarter, then an eighth. The man turned towards him in response to Will stepping out of the shadows. His eyes widened and mouth pursed in preparation to speak but before he could, the knife in Will's hand was sliding into his gut.

Time resumed its quick pace with sharp clarity, but whatever anxiety Will expected to feel never came to fruition. The man was only able to cry out for half a second before Will was covering his mouth with his free hand. Hannibal's maroon tentacles, still entangled in Will's fingers, spread over the stranger's mouth and nose immediately, choking him while Will jerked the knife upwards in his gut.

"Go for the neck, darling. Wouldn't want to damage those precious organs, now would we?" Hannibal's floating head broke from Will's neck; he watched the stranger's eyes widen and felt a silent scream against his hand, though he hadn't stopped trying to scream since Will slipped the knife into his gut.

He yanked the knife out with a quick, jerky pull, and plunged it into the dying man's neck, blood coating his hand as the blade cut through his windpipe and jugular. Blood bubbled up through his mouth as well; it trickled through the webbing of Will's fingers.

Will knew the second the life left the man's body, he felt it slip away as his eyes glazed over in the haziness of death.

The stranger fell limply to the ground when Will yanked out the knife, too stunned for a moment by his own actions to comprehend the hunger in his gullet. As always, the desire was still there, and now with the scent of viscera flooding his nostrils, it was becoming harder to think rationally, but for the moment he was shock still.

No guilt bloomed within him though. There were a myriad of emotions to sift through, but none of them were guilt.

"My darling, I cannot say I expected such savagery. Have you been holding out on me?"

"I...I don't know what happened. I just moved." Except a part of him *did* know. He wanted death, he wanted to enact it before his cloying empathy froze his feet. He wanted to *live*,

selfishly, hedonistically, with all the pleasures that Hannibal afforded him, and he wanted to take that life by the reins, not to deal with it reluctantly.

The corpse of the stranger lay cooling at his feet, still partially on the sidewalk. Will didn't think too much about it as he dragged him further into the alley and crouched down so he was poised just over him

Hannibal merged back with him, not entirely covering their body, but giving Will his teeth and claws so he could tear into the meal he procured. *Let us leave frightful considerations for later, my Will. It would not be wise to let these organs you gave us go to waste.* He could hear the tangible pride in Hannibal's deep voice, wrapping around him like one of his slick appendages.

Will descended upon the corpse with the fervor of a man possessed. Some might say he was, that his parasite was a demon — he certainly looked the part.

The skin parted just as easily as Tier's, if not more so now that he'd had a bit of practice. His knife's path had either been lucky or instinctual, since he didn't nick the liver or kidney, which would have tainted the flavor of all the surrounding organs.

Maybe there was some merit to the possession theory, he certainly never cared much about the flavor of organ meat before.

Their tongue trailed out of their mouth, dipping into the wound of the stranger's neck while their claws pulled out the organs in his gut. One by one they went down their gullet — Will was already feeling better, though he knew their stomach wouldn't settle until the brain was devoured.

Will pressed their claws into the apex of the skull and pressed, just like he had with the buck, and exposed the gray-pink meat. He pulled until the brain stem snapped, then tore the halves apart, palming one in each hand. Unlike last time, he didn't choke the organ down in one desperate bite, he savored it. Their needle-sharp teeth tore off bits and chunks and he tasted how the flavors differed from the cerebellum to the frontal lobes to the pituitary gland.

All the while, he didn't once think of the life that he had just stolen.

He didn't know why he'd agonized so much before. Will had always been a man trapped by indecision, too caught up in his own head to know what to do or where his morals fell, but now he had a clear image. He'd already told himself that he casted aside morality when he allowed Hannibal to stay within him, this was the heated practice of his depravity.

It felt good. *Damn* good. Far better than he could have ever expected.

He was almost disappointed by the time the body was hollowed, though this time he remembered to pluck out the eyes before he finished.

He stood back up, all blood cleaned from his person courtesy of his symbiote that loved the taste so much, and stared at the damage that he caused.

“Will?”

“Yeah?” He could feel Hannibal’s hesitation again. His wariness was likely more than founded at this point, though there was a part of Will that knew that he didn’t need to have it.

“Not to disparage my pride in you, but are you alright? You seemed quite conflicted until mere minutes ago.”

“...I think so,” Will said softly, knowing fully well what he just did, but still feeling a dream-like state settling around him.

“What changed your mind?”

“Nothing, or I’m not really sure it was made up to begin with. I just...wanted to, and I did, and now I’m not sure where this leaves us.”

“I’m not detecting the sour tinge of guilt. You do not regret this kill.”

“No, I don’t.” If there was one thing he was sure about, it was that, despite all his musings and confusing thoughts, the actual act of killing this innocent man did not send his gut twisting. “Do you think you could take me home now?”

“Of course, my dear.”

Will allowed himself to slip under as Hannibal took control of their limbs. He even allowed him to gently rock Will’s mind into unconsciousness as they ran back to Wolf Trap.

Hannibal must’ve gotten ahold of one too many of those rustic living magazines that advertised singing bass wall mounts and checkered woolen pajama sets because apparently he’d decided that what Will’s pack absolutely needed were to wear bandanas around their necks instead of collars.

There was no real point to them, and most of the dogs just pawed them off, but Will knew he had a fondness for aesthetics and Winston was a uniquely patient dog that happily accommodated the new accessory.

Will didn’t really see the hype until the most well-behaved member of his pack came trotting inside with the pale blue bandana on, holding the plastic-wrapped newspaper in his mouth, depositing it at their feet. Hannibal darted out a few tentacles to scratch behind the dog’s ears to his obvious pleasure. He rolled over almost immediately as Hannibal moved to scratch his belly.

The papers didn’t routinely come all the way out here, but recently Will had decided to sign up to have the Baltimore Sun delivered, and for good reason too if the title page was anything to go by.

The Chesapeake Ripper: Baltimore’s Newest Organ Harvester.

He couldn't help but chuckle lightly at the moniker. The headline almost gave the impression that they were the newly crowned victors of a particularly grotesque competition — the prettiest newcomer at a pageant.

“Hannibal, come look at this.”

His symbiote darted back to his side, to Winston's obvious displeasure. Will angled the newspaper so he could see and that shark grin widened, showing off his jagged rows of serrated teeth.

“I suppose it was about time that our work be recognized.”

Over the past few months, Will had become far more accustomed to their hunts, learned to find a certain joy in them, though he realized now that he always had the capacity for it. In the last couple, he'd even allowed Hannibal a little fun with the bodies they left, of course adding his own bits of flair as well.

“What title do you like better? The Dollmaker or the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“The Chesapeake Ripper. It rolls off the tongue, doesn't it?” His long, snaking tongue lolled from his mouth to emphasize his point. While it was out, he licked Will's face in a long stripe like one of his dogs before retracting it.

Will laughed and pushed him away playfully, though of course he never went far. He could feel Hannibal's deep, responding chuckle through their connection, where he was wrapped around Will's very bones.

End Notes

damn sry this took so long yall i have completely forgotten how to write these past few months

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